**LIDIA VIANU**

# DESPERADO
# ESSAY-INTERVIEWS



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**FOREWORD**

These Desperado interviews are in fact essay-interviews with an agenda of their own: they try to circumscribe the term Desperado, and prove its validity. The authors interviewed agree or disagree, and their positions build a literary atmosphere of the mind. After several books the interviewer has written on Desperado authors, the time has come for the authors themselves to speak.

In good Desperado tradition, this is an open volume. It does not settle anything. Some like the term, some are diffident, some rage against it. Yet no one says ‘I want to keep out of this’, which means that one thing is certain: where Postmodernism falters, Desperado can find a way.

Whatever we call our time, this turn of the third millennium, is after all irrelevant. What we make of it is all important, and these interviews will help the lover of letters trace the boundaries of literature nowadays.

The interviewees are major novelists (Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes, John Fowles, Alasdair Gray, David Lodge, Timothy Mo, Graham Swift), major poets (such as Dannie Abse, Alan Brownjohn, Andrei Codrescu, Ruth Fainlight, Elaine Feinstein, John Mole, George Szirtes, to name just very few) and important literary critics (Robert Hampson, David Lodge, Eugen Simion). They answered the questions in writing, which ought to explain the nature of their texts and sometimes the lack of orality.

The order is strictly and tactfully alphabetical.

## Contents

## Dannie Abse, *Words tell me that I think*

Interview with **DANNIE ABSE** (born 22 September 1923), British poet and novelist

**LIDIA VIANU:** When I received your books, a note from you said, 'I hope the enclosed pleases you.' This short introduction is emblematic for you. For your warmth, tenderness and gentle care for the reader. Upon reading your poems, I am overwhelmed by your emotions, which do one major thing: they bring up mine. You care for the reader's sensibility and understanding as you would for a patient. What is poetry for Doctor Dannie Abse: a hobby (so many books could never be the result of a mere hobby), a 'mug's game', an emotional outlet, an outburst of tenderness?

**DANNIE ABSE:** Hobby? No, a need.

**LV**. Your lines are as clear as a blessing. Actually, you write in a blessing mood. I think this is the generosity of a doctor, accompanied by the honesty of a true poet, who need not hide behind encoded sentences. You write what you think, but what you think is not always what you feel. Your thoughts have an indirect strategy (like all good poetry) of hiding the flat statement and offering the fragrance of guessed feeling. Is clarity a project in your poems? Is it (as Eliot described criticism) 'as inevitable as breathing'?

**DA.** Clarity? I once wrote that I would like my reader to enter my poems and be deceived that he/she could see through them like sea-water, and be puzzled when he/she cannot quite touch bottom.

**LV**. I confess I do not like –isms (Eliot's influence, again), Postmodernism included. In an attempt to avoid this label I have fallen in my own trap: I have devised the name Desperado for the contemporary writers who desperately want to be themselves and their own trend. You do not seem to care about such things. Your poetry is calm and indifferent to the somersaults of your age. You are new and yet so classical. I am at a loss: what – if any – was your intention? Compete with other poets or compete with yourself?

**DA**. There is no competition. Poets try to do 'their own thing.'

**LV**. One Desperado feature is to use the poem as a shelter for minute and innumerable narratives. You tell so many stories. Even more than the incidents you relate. Your emotions can be decoded into stories, too. Your life is a story to

you. So many poets today empty the word of stories, even more, of meaning, and then play upon uncouth rhymes or funny rhythms. The result... but you guess what can come out of such a vain attempt. Your lines burst with life. Again, is story telling a project in your poems? Would you recognize a willful strategy in this hybridization of fiction and poetry (which is not new, but done so very differently from of old)?

**DA**. 'The name of the story will be Time/ But you must not pronounce its name./ Tell me a story of deep delight.' (lines from Robert Penn Warren).

**LV**. I detect clear echoes of Eliot in many poems, and fainter traces of Auden, Hughes, mainly William Carlos Williams (with whom I hoped you would have a little in common and I found out you had even more than that – or am I wrong?). Who are your models and, if the idea does not seem repugnant (to most Desperadoes it does – they all want to be on their own, which is human nature, after all), what is the literary group you might be said to belong to, or to have belonged to, at any point in your life? Do you belong anywhere?

**DA**. I discovered William Carlos Williams rather late, when 'influences' to some degree ceased. Besides, William Carlos Williams rarely confronted his medical experience in his poems – as he did in his prose.

**LV**. You say you are both Welsh and Jewish. One other poet who admitted to that is Ruth Fainlight. Jewishness is not easily assumed. It is no burden for you, you are very much at ease as to who you are and what your home is. For my – and your – readers in this interview, would you care to confess more than your poems reveal? Talk about your father, your mother who died in hospital (peeping at your life from your poems), your two grandmothers, your son, your daughter, your grandchildren, and, mainly, your wife? I am only talking on the basis of your poems, I actually know nothing except the incidents you chose to make poems of. Who is Doctor Dannie Abse?

**DA**. Who is Dannie Abse? See my Autobiography (*Goodbye 20th Century*).

**LV**. 'Twice upon a time', as one of your poems begins (*Duality*), there was no irony and no prosaic streak in poetry. You have plenty of both, and that ranges you with the other Desperadoes. But you have a kind of irony that is very different: your irony is deeply caring. Your sense of humour is both warm and sharp. Is it important for a poet to have a sense of humour, in your opinion?

**DA**. Humour? 'Comedy is the blossom of the nettle' (Coleridge).

**LV**. In *The Trial* you write, ‘Once, I built a bridge right into myself.’ I have the feeling that this bridge is your poetry, all of it. I do not know the story of your life after reading all your poems, but I certainly know the inner you, because you confess a lot, especially when you talk about other people than yourself. Actually you never talk about yourself, yet you make the reader feel he is very close to you. How do you manage this little game of indirection, which is an important strategy for your poems?

**DA**. A bridge? Yes – though one end reaches the mists...

**LV**. In many ways you write like a doctor. On the one hand, you have a little of Huxley’s cold observation, on the other you have what few doctors really have, an extraordinary sympathy. Your heart warms up for every being in pain. Now, this is not a Desperado feature. Most Desperadoes are cold and disagreeable, defiantly aloof from their readers. You are a compassionate poet. Is that your intention or just an accident, caused by your first profession (the medical one – if the order is right)? I wonder, do you consider yourself first a poet or first a doctor?

**DA**. I like to think I’m a poet and Medicine my serious hobby.

**LV**. In *Poem and Message* you say something about ‘Words of safety, words of love’, followed by the confession ‘And I call your name as loud as I can/ and I give you all the light I am.’ I am aware (Eliot was right, again) that some of these words were uttered when you were very young and you may be very different at your present age. A poet changes. Yet all through your poetry there runs this vein of **reassuring honesty**. You play/write with all your cards on the table. What is the essential quality of a poet, do you think?

**DA.** Don’t know.

**LV**. In *After the Release of Ezra Pound* you make a very plain statement:

> Pound did not hear the raw Jewish cry,
> the populations committed to the dark
> when he muttered through microphones
> of murderers.

You are very much aware of your Jewishness, yet you seem to have struck deep roots in Wales. You belong to England. Or am I wrong? The times you mention Israel do not seem of vital importance. I should say you have

sympathy for Jews and love for England. Would that be mistaken? Have you ever thought otherwise? For the sake of your readers, would you, this once, tell us the story of your life and where you really feel you belong?

**DA**. Please see *Autobiography*.

**LV**. *A Winter Convalescence* echoes Eliot explicitly in 'Humankind/ cannot bear very much unreality'. Unfaithful, mocking echo, in good Eliotian tradition. Did Eliot mean anything/much in your formation as a poet? You quote him in bits almost everywhere. *Funland 3* has another such slightly (and significantly modified) line: 'Why should the aged peacock/ stretch his wings?' One can feel you have read him thoroughly. Was he an essential pattern? Your poetry is so much more relaxed and reassuring.

**DA**. Eliot. I like to think *Funland* is more savage than *The Waste Land*. Certainly Eliot was an early influence, but so were many others.

**LV**. *Even* wonders: 'could it be I am another/ tormented, anti-semite Jew?' You are half pleased and half afraid of this. Well, are you?

**DA**. *Even* – Irony.

**LV**. A second important obsession is that of medicine. *Not Beautiful* records: 'once, while dissecting a nerve in a cadaver/ my cigarette dropped, fell into its abdomen./ I picked it up. I puffed out the smoke of hell.' Medicine is your second – maybe your first – nationality. You use it in order to convey the message that you are unafraid. You are a poet who does not fear or obey convention (that makes you a Desperado), a person who fears no borders, whether they be racial, intellectual, and professional. You mix all the levels of your life into one, all-important work (hybridization of this kind makes you a Desperado, again). You say in a poem, in a persona's voice, that you take yourself very seriously as a poet. From the poet we also learn that you take yourself very seriously as a doctor, as well. Who has the upper hand in your inner world, though, the poet or the doctor? After William Carlos Williams, I should say literary critics should now come up with a class in itself, that of doctor-poets (or should it be poet-doctors? I do not think so.)

**DA**. See autobiography.

**LV**. The death of your parents, briefly touched upon, very discreetly, is painful. In *Interview with a Spirit Healer* there is one line: 'I became mortal the night my father died.' Another poem talks of death (many more poems do, actually), *Give Me Your Hands*:

Faint in the hall the telephone goes.
As I approach, how loud it grows.
I lift up a voice saying, 'Doctor?'

So in a room I do not know
I hold a hand I do not know
for hours. Again a dry old hand.

Death is the beginning of life to you, you just cannot see its finality, although, as a doctor, you know exactly what it is all about. This is the reason why I think you turn all the painful deaths in your life into sources of poetry, of strong emotion. You use death. To John Donne death was a picturesque background. To you it is life. Your poems are all more or less about death, but none is morbid. I think you are an incurable optimist, a strong, (again) reassuring poet. How do you view yourself?

**DA**. Death? I think Death is the patron of all the arts.

**LV**. *A Winter Visit* is a tender poem about the most untender thing in the world – old age. Eliot once said Yeats was 'preeminently the poet of middle age'. You are preeminently a poet who reassures. You treat your readers with the doctor's deference and concern:

*A Winter Visit*

Now she's ninety I walk through the local park
where, too cold, the usual peacocks do not screech
and  neighboring lights come on before it's dark.

Dare I affirm to her, so aged and so frail,
that from one pale dot of peacock's sperm
spring forth all the colours of a peacock's tail?

I do. But she like the sibyl says, ‘I would die’;
then complains, ‘This winter I’m half dead, son.
And because it’s true I want to cry.

Yet must not (although only Nothing keeps)
for I inhabit a white coat not a black
even here — and am not qualified to weep.

So I speak of small approximate things,
of how I saw, in the park, four flamingoes
standing, one-legged on ice, heads beneath wings.

What do you expect back from these readers? When you keep reminding them of Eliot and mingling his words (such as the Sibyl’s motto, here), when you make them watch your and their own mothers die slowly but soon, when you decide you are not ‘qualified to weep’. You are the man who inhabits ‘a white coat not a black’. I take this to be the definition of your poetic mood, and your message to your readers. How would you put into words the idea that is the dearest to your poetry?

**DA**. White coat – doctor. Black coat – mortician.

**LV**. *No Reply* has two defining lines. One is, ‘because I’m Welsh because I’m a Jew’, the other, ‘because when sick I’m still a doctor.’ They both answer a generic ‘Why?’ The question in large might be, Why a poet? Why have you chosen poetry?

**DA**. I like to think poetry chose me along with many others.

**LV**. *Pantomime Diseases* shows not only your sense of humour but also your love of debunking, contradicting convention: Sleeping Beauty married a fat Prince ‘out of duty/ and suffered insomnia ever after.’ ‘Snow White suffered from profound anaemia./ The genie warned, ‘Aladdin, you’ll go blind.’ ‘The Babes in the Wood died of pneumonia.’ Red Riding Hood had ‘Scarlet Fever’. In conclusion, ‘The lies of Once-upon-a-Time appall’. The same as all Desperadoes, even when they slip into lyricism, you use irony as a second main weapon. Do you consider yourself ironic?

**DA**. Sometimes.

**LV**. The poem *Phew!* (your Sunday best irony on display, and your most volcanic feeling close behind) is a paradox: you are shy when it comes to invoking love, or, rather, you are sceptical, because of many reasons (doctor's reasons, Dannie Abse reasons mostly), yet in this poem love gushes forth and there is no stopping it. All the more convincing as it is not even once mentioned as a word. Not as a mere word, indeed:

Do you know that Sumerian proverb
'A man's wife is his destiny'?
But supposing you'd been here,
this most strange of meeting places,
5000 years too early? Or me,
a fraction of a century too late?
No angel with SF wings
would have beckoned,
'This way, madam, this way, sir.'

Have you ever, at a beach,
aimed one small pebble
at another, thrown high, higher?

And though what ends
happily
is never the end,
and though the secret is
there's another secret always,

because this, because that,
because on high the Blessed
were playing ring-a-ring-o'-roses,
because millions of miles below,
during the Rasoumovsky,

the cellist, pizzicati,
played a comic, wrong note,
you looked to the right, luckily,
I looked to the left, luckily.

Desperadoes have, as a common feature, this mistrust of love confessed. Feeling is all right. Naming is an altogether different matter. In novels the image of the (un)happy couple is gone. Poets claim they do not want to confess. The whole edifice of traditional, conventional literature crumbles. The very idea of poetry has changed. Is it your intention to contribute to such a change?

**DA**. Naming. ‘To name is to destroy, to suggest is to create’. Mallarmé.

**LV**. Your volume of *Collected Poems 1948-1988* is entitled *White Coat, Purple Coat*, and your last page enlarges upon it thus:

White coat and purple coat
can each be worn in turn
but in the white a man will freeze
an in the purple burn.

It is, I think, your dilemma: white (as in doctor) or purple (as in poetry, emotion ‘recollected in tranquillity’)? After a long set of questions, after this trip into your soul, could you close with a clear statement, such as ‘I can be found in...’? Can we make sure we have found you in your lines or is Dannie Abse condemned to being his own persona? Is confessive poetry such a sin as most Desperadoes would have us think?

**DA**. Purple coat is sometimes worn by magicians. Perhaps I was influenced by the clothes worn by Dr Anton Mesmer!
Clear statement. I can’t unless it be to confess that words tell me that I think.

July 1, 2002

## Peter Ackroyd, *The mind is the soul*

Interview with **PETER ACKROYD** (born 1949), British novelist

**LIDIA VIANU:** A Desperado author is not happy until his reader gives in to the novel as to a trance. Your books move back and forth in time, between centuries, between minds, pushing the reader into the experience of a perpetual present, which includes all times, all thoughts, all sensibilities. The highly narrative style is mingled with a lyrical suspension of disbelief. Although full of suspense and palpitating stories, your novels are preeminently lyrical experiences. Are you a poet as well? Is poetry more important than prose, when you write?

**PETER ACKROYD:** I began my literary career as a poet, and for many years thought of nothing else. It is the case that, when I stopped writing poetry, I began almost immediately to write prose. I believe the same sensibility simply migrated into a different medium.

**LV**. Is it your intention to create a new literary genre, a hybrid of fiction, poetry and drama? Hybridization of literary genres was the discovery of the stream of consciousness, but its real feats have been accomplished between the 1950s and now. Do you resort to it deliberately or instinctively (writing as the novel comes, which is the more plausible answer, but, hopefully, not the only one)?

**PA**. I am not particularly concerned with generic matters – just as you cannot expect a composer to write only symphonies or only operas, so a writer must be free to explore every available form of writing. You mention the hybrid of poetry and drama and fiction, but I would also like to include historical narrative as part of that mingling, for example. I am interested in creating a form that includes those elements which have been generally classified as ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’.

**LV**. You create your own reader, the sharing reader, who has to lend himself to the author’s expert hand, and this author is never satisfied till he reaches absolute communion. You almost lead the reader to the point where he becomes author himself. The reader partakes of a sacred rite, which is your imagination. There is in most authors a Desperado stiffness which claims that the reader is not meant to do anything special. Are you aware that your reader is a creative reader? Do you mean your books to go on in the reader’s mind after creation and reading have had their say? Do you accept the reader’s interference in your own creation?

**PA**. I am quite happy for the readers to enter and recreate the world to which I summon them. Part of the meaning of my work might be seen as an attempt to construct an alternative reality. Or, rather, a heightened reality in which the sacred forces of the world are as plain as any more familiar elements.

**LV**. You have written the most remarkable biography of T.S. Eliot, which is at the same time a novel and a critical initiation. You mix there fiction, literary history and literary criticism. I should say you are a new kind of critic, the commonsensical, well-informed critic, who despises scholarly digressions from clarity and sense. *Are* you a critic? Eliot used to say creation itself was a critical act, too. As an Eliot specialist, I owe most of my understanding of Eliot in all his hypostases – stream of consciousness poet, critic and dramatist, master of hybridization – to your book. Yet you place fiction before criticism, I should say. Would I be wrong? How important is literary criticism in the context of your creation?

**PA**. I do not believe that I am a critic in any familiar or conventional sense. In my biography of Eliot I attempted, for example, to reproduce the cadences of the man within the style of my prose – thus offering the alert reader a means of understanding the true nature of his writing.

**LV**. You have used Eliot as a source of inspiration. I cannot say he has influenced you, but I find echoes from him in *Hawksmoor, English Music, Chatterton*. Your mind uses echoes as a technique of rising above time, and this is your major strategy both as a craftsman of the novel and a lyrical sensibility, that willingly becomes an exile from reality. It is your gift to melt together, in the alchemy of your creation, the soul and the story. Which comes first, when you write? Do you start with a story or with a mood? Do you plan your narratives from at first?

**PA**. The story seems always to introduce itself first, but it cannot really be distinguished from the cadence and 'mood' which I am attempting to create.

**LV**. Death is a recurrent theme, which burdens all Desperado sensibilities, from Graham Swift (*Last Orders*), to Julian Barnes (*Flaubert's Parrot*), Doris Lessing (*The Memoirs of a Survivor*), Michael Ondaatje (*The English Patient*). You treat it like a sweet mystery. It is present in all your novels as a physical state, not as an incident. There is a life in death, a life after death, life and death are woven together. You make the reader see death as the courage to live beyond. Crossing the border, crossing all borders, is your lesson. Are you deliberately didactic, do you actually mean to convey a message, or does this lesson flow naturally from your sensibility on to the page, and from the page into the reader's own sensibility? Would you allow the reader's reading mood to float freely, without guiding it? How much are

you aware of what you really do when you write, of the consequences of your books on other imaginations? What is your priority?

**PA**. There is no message as such – at least not one that can be identified except in the experience of reading the novels, which must of course differ from reader to reader. I never know the ending of the novels, for example, until the ending happens – it happens instinctively, almost by an act of chance or indirection.

**LV**. You are a great lover of narratives. Your pastime is to find new narrative modes. *Hawksmoor* ends one chapter and begins the next with the same sentence, in a new context. *English Music* plunges the main hero into trance chapters, going as far back as several centuries. You have a critic's mind, seeing everywhere hints to be decoded, and the soul of a novelist, the dreams of a poet. The three combined make us share the story. Your reader is never excluded, or an outsider. You urge us to witness creation from the inside, to appropriate the text. Do you like your reader to reinterpret the text freely, maybe get out of it something you never thought of putting there? Do you like critics who come up with fancy (mis)readings of your texts? What is the profile of your ideal critic?

**PA**. If the reader understands the mysteries of time, if he or she is willing to suspend belief in normal realities, if the reader is willing to cross that threshold where life and death are the same, then any further act of guidance on my part seems superfluous.

**LV**. Poetry opens for you the door into the out-of-time. Most Desperadoes are not that lucky. They are dry and refuse access to the beyond. You are a great lover of words, I should even say a slave to words (in the meaning in which Valéry was a 'galley-slave of nuances', as he put it himself). Your sentences are short poems. You are not so much direct as evocative of moods. You combine the love for striking, memorable words of your stream of consciousness predecessors with the matter-of-fact narrative of the Desperadoes. You are a hybrid of two authors: one who means to enslave the soul of the reader, the other one who sets the reader free to find his own way, and watches him enigmatically. How much of yourself are you willing to reveal in your writings? How autobiographical are you? Most of your novels are not. Is there any one novel more autobiographical than others?

**PA**. There cannot help but be autobiographical elements in the novels. After all, I am writing them. The 'I' must reflect upon itself. The 'I' must conjure forth its own particular meanings. There are straight elements of autobiography, in terms of location, in *First Light*. Otherwise not a significant ostensible element.

**LV**. You ruin chronology in a subtle way. If Lessing is bitter, Lodge and Bradbury humorous, Barnes bitingly witty, you are preeminently tender. Your sensibility ruins the line of the story, diving into islands of *is* and *was* at random. History swallows the chronology of the narrative, and whatever the moment, we only know we are still alive, ready to live more, willing to read more. What is your aim when you dive into the past? You said in another interview you wanted to sketch a history of London. I think you want far more than that. You want to outline all history, the sense of history, not only just London. Would it be wrong to say that you are a philosopher of history while being a novelist whose inspiration is the sweet mystery of the past?

**PA**. The phrase philosopher of history is perhaps a little portentous. I do wish to create a sense of history or, rather, a sense of time passing as a melody. I am interested, too, in the topographical imperative whereby a certain spot of earth can actively fashion or harbour certain patterns of sustained activity over many generations. It is the presence of past time which envelops me.

**LV**. Unlike most Desperadoes, you are incredibly quotable. Eliot used to say poetry could communicate before it was understood. Do you feel fiction can, too? Because reason is by no means enough for your reader. Your reader must reach beyond mere understanding. You are a striver for the limit of understanding, and your readers learn to accept more than can be logically explained, which brings lyricism back into the picture once again. How do you think you relate to Joyce and Woolf (who flooded fiction with poetry) on the one hand, and T.S. Eliot (who fictionalized poetry) on the other?

**PA**. I would prefer to put myself in the line of Cockney visionaries, who saw elements of the sacred and the symbolic in their local circumstances. Among them are Blake and Dickens and Turner. I suppose we might count Woolf and Eliot and Joyce as honorary companions of that order.

**LV**. Virginia Woolf claimed there should be no love interest attached to the novel. An age later, the interest of the Desperado novel moves from the couple (which still existed for the stream of consciousness) to the lonely individual facing life. The character rejects chronological causality: the present is no longer caused by the past, and it does not cause any future to happen. Life is an enticing mystery precisely because it loses the line of love and time. Your novel becomes a communion with the unspeakable. How would you define this unspeakable for a student of your work? If it is not love interest, what words could express your main theme, your major obsession?

**PA**. My major obsession is with the love of the past for the present, and the present for the past.

**LV**. I think that by building everyday parallelisms for past ages, you debunk history. Your characters are projected in lines of similar heroes, who melt into one another. Your narrative situations slide in endless lines of similarity. *Chatterton*, for instance, is a book of fakes. A poet fakes his own death, a painting fakes Chatterton's image by using another writer as a model, a painter fakes his master, a novelist fakes a good novel by copying the plot of another novelist, a humble librarian fakes family life by stealing it from his dead friend (whose death is probably the only real thing in the book, and the least appealing). Nothing is reliable any more. This love of interpretation as a perpetuum mobile is your way of showing humour. I do believe you have a strong sense of humour. Is that true? Where do you think your reader should look for that very Desperado irony, which no contemporary author can write without? Do you see yourself as sympathetic, detached, ironical, present or absent from your text on purpose?

**PA**. I do have a sense of humour, I hope, although it veers towards the pantomimic and the theatrical. I am not at all 'detached' from the texts, or ironical – I am all too fervently attached to them to be anything other than fully engaged. I suppose there is even some humour to be found in that.

**LV**. You create a dreamy novel. You mix in your novels fiction, poetry, drama, history, music, thoughts and dialogue. Yet you hate sentimentality, in good Desperado tradition. Because of the refusal to dwell upon the major link in human existence which is love (and which is felt in the background but never exploited as a source of incidents), your narrative is unwilling, it advances against the grain, pushed ahead by a haunted mind. What comes first when you embark on a novel, the mind (swimming in echoes of many arts and ages) or the soul (besieged by irresistible tides of lyricism)?

**PA**. The mind is the soul.

October 5, 2001

**R. V. Bailey,** ***It's no good being 'deep and meaningful' if what you write isn't meaningful to anybody else***

Interview with **R.V. BAILEY (**born 20 August 1932), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** You say you are a 'late beginner' and a 'poet by accident'. The last poem in your volume (*Road*) is masterful. There are many others, on old age, parents, solitude. They all betray a wonderful sensibility. Now that you do write poetry, do you feel it to be a calling?

**R.V. BAILEY** I really don't think I've ever had a 'career' as such: life so far has simply meant saying 'yes' to whatever seemed to turn up. This isn't a bit respectable, I know, but it's what happened. I've had a variety of proper jobs, and enjoyed them, but I can't remember ever making the sort of decisions one is supposed to make about one's 'calling'. Poetry was just one of the things I said yes to when it came along. The students I was requiring to write poems, as part of their creative writing course, very sensibly decided that – if I were to retain any sort of credibility in their eyes – I should write poems too. So I did, and thus it all began. Afterwards, colleagues in a small workshop kept me up to the mark.

I daresay I'd never have started writing if I hadn't been obliged to, but once started I couldn't easily stop. I wouldn't think it deserved such an august description as a 'calling', though.

**LV**. What was your profession before? What was your education? Did your training lead you to literature?

**RB.** Literature was always, from schooldays, of enormous importance. Books were the things I wanted most, and they were special, and of course hardback, apart from Penguins. Paper for publishing was in short supply, during the war and soon after. I ordered most of T.S. Eliot and Auden and so forth via the bookshop at the local railway station, half an hour's walk away. There was a library, but I don't remember a bookshop in my home town then.

**LV**. Your clarity is delightful. What do you think of encoded poetry? Will poetry survive if it can hardly be understood, however deep and meaningful it may prove to be?

**RB**. Encoded poetry is fine by me, though I don't write it. For the reader, its rewards are different from the rewards more conventional poetry offers, and have more in common, perhaps, with the pleasures of solving crosswords puzzles. People have a serious need for poetry (think of all those poetical messages in birthday cards, and the poems people spontaneously wrote after the death of Princess Diana). I suppose if we never fell in love or suffered loss or death or loneliness or any of the great human experiences, I daresay we'd not need poetry. So poetry should be accessible, even if it requires some effort in reading. Sometimes poetry deals with subjects that are just too difficult to write of very simply. But (you guessed it) I haven't much sympathy with the portentous. It's no good being 'deep and meaningful' if what you write isn't meaningful to anybody else.

**LV**. Many Desperado poets – as I call them – run away from confession. They hide behind imagined stories, they rely on invented incidents to convey their moods. You seem not to care. You do both. Is it wrong to look for the poet's life in the poem? Sometimes – always, I should say – the poet's life is the plot of the volume. It takes the reader places and offers him experience to rent, just like fiction. When you read a novel, you live one more life, they say. The more you read, the more lives you lead. Why, then, knowing this, do most Desperado poets refuse to share their own story with the reader?

**RB**. I'm not keen on confessional poetry. I wouldn't get far if all I had to write about was me. Of course we all like to guess the writer's life from the poetry – we're all curious and nosey. But the 'I' of poetry isn't always the simple 'I' of the self: there are all sorts of voices, and poets, like novelists, often get into somebody else's shoes. We'd be terribly limited if we only had our own experiences – reading and writing are both about being able to see things from somebody else's point of view. That's the liberating – and indeed the civilising – force of literature. As you say, it's 'experience to rent' As far as 'Desperado' poets refusing to share their own stories – well, perhaps they don't feel their own stories to be the right vehicles for what they want to say.

**LV**. Is it enough to invent stories and emotions when you write a volume of poems? Fiction writers invent. Why would it not be enough for poets as well?

**RB**. I suppose all art forms, including fiction, are at bottom about trying to tell the truth; certainly poetry is. But 'the truth' is, among other things, a matter of the imagination; it comes in many shapes, and is hard to pin down. I'm not quite sure what you mean when you say 'is it enough' to invent stories and emotions, or why you feel that poets don't 'invent' these things. I think they do. Is poetry more direct than prose? Well, it's shorter than prose, more concentrated, higher octane (proof spirit, if you like). The words do their bit, and 'knowing' the poet can illuminate the words, but it can also distort our understanding of them. In the last analysis the words have to stand alone.

**LV**. Do you read criticism of poetry? What do you expect from it?

**RB**. Some criticism is worth reading, usually the criticism that is written by other poets; Coleridge, Sidney, Johnson, for example, in the past, and contemporary poet-critics now. I've read a lot of it, inevitably, in my time, but I don't read much now – there's not time to read everything, and I'd rather spend more of it on the poetry.

**LV**. Is criticism necessary to the poet in any way? The readers of poetry are said to be fewer and fewer every year. Do you feel this to be true? Is poetry going to survive this crisis of reading on the whole? Are young people today reading poetry any more? I see many of them writing it, anyway...

**RB**. I'd have thought the opposite. Poetry lost a lot of ground with the Modernists; a whole generation of potential readers gave up then. But poetry has gone on, and certainly since the Sixties and the Liverpool Poets I think the poetry audience has increased. Now we have a whole range of new voices, new audiences. Performance poets like John Hegley are widely appreciated. And there's all the influence of the Caribbean writers, a full range of women writers, local, national, and sectional voices of all sorts, and influences from music, rap, and so on. No: I think the poetry audience has actually increased enormously. And of course people are increasingly interested in writing poetry – witness the vast numbers of creative writing courses on offer. Mind you, I sometimes wonder if people who write poetry and go to courses actually read enough poetry.

24 February 2005

## Julian Barnes, *Giving up criticism is much easier than giving up alcohol or tobacco*

Interview with **JULIAN BARNES** (born 1946), British novelist

**LIDIA VIANU**: You belong to a generation of writers who will do anything in their power, form and content (technical and emotional experiment at all costs) to shock, confuse, render the reader helpless. These I have called Desperadoes. Do you feel you relate to the description of the group and to the label?

**JULIAN BARNES**: Well, I'm rather surprised to be called a Desperado. I rather like the description (who wouldn't?) but you make us (if there is an 'us', which I'm sceptical about) sound like a gang led by Clint Eastwood. But who is Clint, and are we a gang? I think we are a very disparate number of rather quiet writers who write rather differently from one another. I certainly think, for my part, that my aim is NOT to do anything in my power to shock, let alone render the reader helpless. I have a very close and affectionate relationship with my putative reader. At times, of course, I like to play with what I suspect s/he knows or expects; I like to render reality in all its confusing complexity; but I in no way think of my readers as either antagonists or victims. That's too easy. My reader sits not opposite me, in any case, but beside me, gazing out at the world in a parallel direction. I merely discuss with my friend the reader what I see and think.

**LV**. You are not part of a trend, though. You are your own trend. How would you describe the 'Julian Barnes movement' ? Daring, inquiring, insinuating, starving for the reader's affection? Or indifferent, independent, haughtily ironical and cold (which it is not, though)?

**JB**. Well, I never think of myself as a one-man movement, or a writer with particular characteristics. I see things from much closer to the ground. I work at each book as it comes along, and forget the previous ones when I do so. My books are often very different from one another, demanding different technical solutions to different formal and thematic questions. From your galaxy of adjectives, I recognize 'ironic' (how could I not?). All I'd say is that the common mistake is that irony precludes sympathy. It doesn't: see Flaubert.

**LV**. The emotional life of your characters is your battlefield. You want to protect it (keep it a mystery) but you tear it to pieces (see *Talking It Over*). The result is what I have called *The Down Syndrome of Emotional Fiction*: a contradiction

which is so stimulating that re-reading becomes a must. Not to study technicalities, but to explore the author's tricky sensibility. How much of yourself do you invest in these characters? Any autobiographical reference? Where?

**JB**. Well, isn't everyone's life an emotional battlefield? And a novel about characters with no emotional ups and downs would be very dull. The novelist's task is both to analyse and to indicate mystery, at the same time. My attitude to the emotional life of my characters is similar to much else in writing: a mixture of subjective involvement and emotional control. My work isn't, however, autobiographical, except maybe for the first third of my first novel. I don't believe in the novel as confession, or as therapy – not for me, anyway. Occasionally I might use something from my own life, but if so, it would be in an entirely objective spirit, and almost certainly unidentifiable.

**LV**. Do you set great store upon a novelist's sensibility? Between romance and crazy invention of tricks, where do you draw the line?

**JB**. Well, a novelist's sensibility is what a novelist is, as distinct from any other novelist; it is the heart-beat and the fingerprint. I think my sensibility involves a fairly wide spectrum of tonalities, as you imply; but I think that is, after all, the modern sensibility (though it is also the Shakespearean sensibility).

**LV**. You write a kind of dystopia of feelings (an absence that will make the heart grow fonder). Do you agree this may be a desperate warning that the Desperado novel needs new experiences? Do you identify with the idea of dystopic emotions?

**JB**. I don't really understand your question. I often write about the darker side of things, true (though not many people get murdered in my fiction – so far). And I agree with Chekhov's advice to a fellow-writer, 'If you want to move (the reader), be colder.' i.e. be restrained in technique, don't ever tell the reader what s/he is meant to feel.

**LV**. Your work as a lexicographer on the *Oxford English Dictionary* may have influenced your style, which is both confusingly rich in synonyms and subtly witty. For the stream of consciousness the novel concentrated in the style. You have definitely come back to the story, yet your focus is much more complex. How would you describe it?

**JB**. I don't think the OED affected my writing. It may have made me a better Scrabble player, but only in the range of words beginning with C,D,E,F or G. But style is central. People who don't understand style think it is like a coat of gloss paint applied to the story to make it shine. That's nonsense. Style, form, theme, all pull equally to convey the truth of life.

**LV**. Writing thrillers brings you to the core of plot before everything else. Do you write them under a pseudonym because your real work is meant to reach farther than the plot, or would you rather skip the question?

**JB**. Yes, thrillers are more plot-filled, though one of the complaints about my thrillers was that they were all atmosphere, character & menace, and not enough plot. I wrote the four thrillers that I did very quickly, as a relaxation. I don't disown them, but I've never reread them, so don't really have an opinion. It takes me 2-3 years to write a novel; it used to take me 2-3 weeks to write a thriller. That's about the relative level of importance I accord them.

**LV**. Among other statements, you once claimed you have become a writer for 'love of words' and 'distaste for office hours.' Your credo could be concentrated in these two phrases: tricky manner and totally unorthodox mood. You love words but do not service them. You destroy any timetable of meaning while hiding inside a perfect plot. You want your readers, yet you shame them into silence. Do you enjoy reactions from them? Do you want to know what critics and common readers find in you? Last but definitely more than least, do you welcome/ tolerate/ hate interviews?

**JB**. Well, that was two out of a number of reasons I gave. I was trying to say that I am temperamentally suited to being a writer (which many writers aren't) as well as deeply committed to the novel as an art form. I don't think I 'shame my readers into silence' (it didn't work with you, did it?). I get quite a few letters from readers. Interviews? I'd say I tolerate them rather than welcome or hate. It depends on the questions, partly. But I do think that the recent mania for artists of all sorts to be obliged to explain themselves as soon as they produce anything is a bit absurd. And not anything they're necessarily much good at.

**LV**. You claim that the novel will 'outlast even God.' Is its vitality rooted in language, plot or technicalities that can constantly be innovated? Is innovation a reason for or against the survival of the novel?

**JB**. Yes, my view is that God is probably a novelist's invention (though I stand to be corrected if he tells me otherwise). Like all art forms, it must innovate to survive. But I think it will survive because of the amount of truth it tells (our species loves to deceive itself, but also hungers for truth), and the fact that other art forms cannot tell those

truths in the way the novel does. The cinema is a miraculous rival, which does some things better, but which can never match the novel for the inner line, the emotional life, the reflective life, the private life – or the private, solitary, intense reader's experience of those things.

**LV**. Your *Flaubert's Parrot* is a masterful illustration of the hybridization of literary genres. You mix fiction, poetry, drama, literary criticism, literary history, even test papers of academic life into it. You build a story within a story, an age inhabits another, characters melt in one, the author himself. Is this author the main character of your novels, a histrionic mind that hides a desperately introvert sensibility? Is the author still in hiding in your novels (as he was in Joyce's)?

**JB**. I believe, with Flaubert, that the novelist should be in his work as God is in the universe, everywhere present and nowhere visible. He succeeded in being more invisible than me, probably. I do also take an inclusive view of what the novel is and can be. If my theme requires non-fictional elements, then so be it – though there will always be a fictional, a novelistic shaping to the narrative of those non-fictional elements.

**LV**. I have called you a 'Desperado of witty fiction.' Your message reaches far deeper than that. Where do you think your sense of humour ends (if that ever happens) and yields the stage to something devastatingly earnest? How would you put into words your most hidden feature, the one we have to wonder at from afar unless we can talk to you face to face?

**JB**. I believe that being funny is a good way of being serious; but being serious is also a good way of being serious. The British literary culture is, after all, not monolithic
or as genre-specific as the French equivalent. Compare Shakespeare with Racine. And we all – novelists and playwrights – descend from Shakespeare, where the Fool often speaks wisdom and the Wise Man speaks folly. Or – more truthfully – people are a mixture of both and get things wrong as often as they get things right.

**LV**. You manage to turn literary criticism into a thriller, in *Flaubert's Parrot*. What kind of critics do you approve of? Between deconstruction and various '-isms' (see Eliot's hatred of 'Leavisitism'), where do you draw the line? How far can a critic go with your novels and not upset their author?

**JB**. I approve of critics who are modest, careful, and doubt-filled; who try to do that hardest of things, give an accurate description of the novel and how it works – who feel its pulse, recognize its tonality, understand what isn't there, and so

on. Most critics rush through an inadequate plot-summary in order to get to what really interests them – their Olympian judgment. Judgement should, however, emerge through summary of the book. The great English critic and short-story writer VS Pritchett understood this. Some people, reading his criticism, think he is merely describing what is going on in Turgenev, or Chekhov. In fact, it's brilliant criticism of literature – and life— at the same time. How far can a critic go with my novels and not upset me? As far as he likes, because nowadays I don't read criticism of my work. In the past it's been a support for the ego, never the slightest help in writing the next book. So I've given it up. Giving up criticism is much easier than giving up alcohol or tobacco, I can tell you.

**LV**. Your novel *Staring at the Sun* is an epic poem, too. In *Talking It Over* you experiment with fiction submerged in drama. Here you blend prose and poetry. This novel puts the reader in a blessing mood. Your irony rescues the show and charms the plot alive, like Sleeping Beauty. From symbols to dystopia, you run up and down the ladder of emotions. Have you written any poetry at all? Do you consider doing it from now on? Is lyricism important to you as a preeminently witty author of fiction?

**JB**. I did write poetry a little, from the ages of about 16 or so to about 25. But it wasn't any good. It was always prosey, argumentative poetry. I think I'm better at writing lyrical prose than prosey poetry.

**LV**. One last question: how much do you know about the communist reality you described in *The Porcupine*? What does the fall of communism mean to you?

**JB**. Well, I was born in 1946, so I'm a child of the Cold war. At school and university I studied Russian. In 1965 I went on a big trip with friends – driving from England through Germany and Poland to Russia, up to Leningrad, down to Kiev and Odessa, into Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and home. I visited Romania again in 1979 – indeed, proposed to my wife in your country. I've been to Bulgaria twice, once just before Communism collapsed, once as it did so. So I know something of the background, and when writing *The Porcupine* I was helped by Bulgarian friends with certain details. I view the fall of Communism as a largely joyous event in itself, though I view much of what followed – the triumphalism of the West, the weakening of the Left's good, true ideas (as opposed to its totalitarian tendencies), the brutal bullying of the spreading capitalist system – with dismay.

November 8, 2000

## Jean Bleakney, *'Desperado' is a flexible term. It respects the outsider/loner status of the poet*

Interview with **JEAN BLEAKNEY** (born 1956), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** After John Brown's interview with you (*In the Chair: Interviews with poets from the North of Ireland*, Salmon Poetry, 2002) most of the topics seem redundant. I have, though, one poem which I like so much that I have to quote it in full:

*On Going without Saying*

I can't begin to tell you
(I keep *meaning* to tell you)
how it feels to drive away ...
the absolute gobsmackery
of wheeling round the corner
to that face-to-face encounter
with Venus—always there these nights,
completely unfazed by streetlights.
I keep forgetting to mention
this localized phenomenon.
I always happen on it too late—
at the wrong end of your one-way street.
By then, there's no turning back.
But some night, I will. I'll shock
the gearbox into reverse
and drag you out to see Venus.
We'll stand there, basking in irony
—shortsighted-you and stargazer-me.
We'll talk about more than the weather;
and maybe, so lit, I'll remember

what it was I wanted to say,
something relating to constancy ...
But just for now, here I sit,
stoically inarticulate.

For a biochemist, a person who works in the garden centre at Belfast, for someone who turned to poetry after a scientific education, this sounds unbelievably perfect. Lyricism enclosed in all the right words. Every word with a clear, concise meaning, not one letter that does not serve a purpose. Since all the right questions have already been asked by John Brown, I will only ask: What is poetry to you now? Why do you write it?

**JEAN BLEAKNEY:** Many thanks Lidia, for those kind words, and for your interest in my work. I'm in the final stages of preparing my second collection, so poetry seems *very* important right now; not least because the deadline has stimulated a blissful burst of new writing. At a very basic level, I write to experience the puzzle-solving pleasure of securing a poem. Also, certain aspects of brain function, especially thought and memory, have always fascinated me. Disappointingly, biochemistry didn't provide many answers. Poetry, for me, is partly that same quest, from a different angle. Otherwise, my love for words and, I must confess, a desire to entertain; show off, even. It's like skimming flat stones across the water: I think I'm quite adept, but I'm not so inclined to lift the stone if there is no one else on the shore to see the bounces and ripples! Is this is a very un-Desperado-like confession?

**LV**. I find that most poets I call Desperado poets hate being grouped with other writers, as they hope to be a trend of their own. Like several contemporary women poets (Carol Rumens, Jo Shapcott, Maura Dooley), you avoid slipping into biography in your verse. Is that deliberate or just inevitable, instinctive reticence? Should a poem rely on a living experience or can it live on ideas only?

**JB**. I'm probably much more instinctively reticent than most poets – possibly because I have come to poetry relatively late in life – but I also think that reticence is an integral part of the show-not-tell quality which is important to the poem and respects the sensibility of the reader. Which is not to say that the 'I' doesn't appear (rather a lot!) in my poetry. But it's a guarded 'I'.

Poems should be rooted, if not in living experience, then in observation, which is, I suppose, an extension of living experience. Hopefully, ideas emerge. And it's more interesting for the reader to see the process of emergence.

**LV**. Since from your volume *The Ripple Tank Experiment* I learn very little about Jean Bleakney the person who writes, I would like to ask who you are, what your life has been so far, what your education has been, anything that would throw light upon the poet, not necessarily the poems.

**JB**. I was born in Newry (on the northern side of the border between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland) in 1956 and lived there for my first 17 years. My family, like many others, was displaced in the early part of The Troubles. Since then, I have lived in or near Belfast. I studied biochemistry at Queen’s University and worked for eight years as a biochemist in medical research. The birth of my second child coincided with a sense of disillusionment with my skills as a research scientist. Also, I was fed up writing grant applications and reports. So it was an easy decision to leave my job (thanks to my wage-earning husband!). Thereafter, my loathing for housework drove me into the garden where I discovered the pleasure of naming and growing plants. Poetry came soon after, in parallel with my children’s language development and my own expanding botanical vocabulary. I started attending the Queen’s Creative Writing Workshop in 1993, when Carol Rumens was Writer in Residence. For the past ten years, I have worked part-time at a garden centre.

**LV**. Your poems have a discreet, ingenious rhyme (when they do). After Eliot, most poets avoid noisy rhymes (he mocked at them while using so many), alliterations, assonances. The music of poetry has changed, from sound to feeling. The music of verse these days is an inner one, a music of sensibility rather than words. Must poetry preserve its ancient craft or should it change to prosey texts?

**JB**. I’m becoming increasingly sensitive to the music of words, especially the possibilities of rhyme: its leaps and bounds help to propel the writing. Yes, there will always be rhyme. Our brains and hearts are pre-programmed to be seduced by it.

**LV**. Your poems never shock verbal propriety, your words are all decent. What do you think of the use of four-letter words, of offensive words, of physically offensive images on the page?

**JB**. Four-letter words are rarely a shock these days, on the ear or to the eye, but I’m not inclined to write about a context in which they would be used, so they don’t occur in my poetry. Not yet, anyway! Physically offensive images are harder to accept. I almost always feel as if I’m being deliberately shocked or manipulated; and I don’t like having to question the motives of the poet, mid-poem. Again, maybe in context? In small doses, certainly. I had to attend post mortems during my research. I particularly remember the body of a child. The most powerful image was neither the incision, nor the removal of tissue, but having to set aside a teddy bear and a rose, its stem wrapped with aluminum foil.

**LV**. Your lines are discreet and have a halo of meditative sadness. Life goes by. You never say so, but I can feel the poignancy of passing seconds, of fragile beauty, menaced by seasons, by our own habit of waiting and then regretting we did not enjoy the moment while it lasted. Do you write with joy, grief, indifference? What gets you started?

**JB**. This is very close reading, Lidia! I am indeed preoccupied with passing time and the consequences of tempting fate by leaving all sorts of things undone. The garden, where chaos can replace order in such a short time, offers many associated metaphors. I probably write with resignation, a sense of 'that's the way life *is*'. Whence poignancy and wistfulness.

I rarely start out to write a poem about x, y or z (though recently, I *have* enjoyed writing a sequence of poems about the paintings of the Hungarian artist Csontváry). Sometimes, I start from an image or a coincidence of images. Mostly, the poem develops from a line or a phrase that arrives unbidden.

**LV**. Ireland is the country of Joyce, Yeats, Swift, Heaney. You are Irish, I understand. You say the Irish landscape means a lot to you. Does it make you different from British poets? In what way?

**JB**. I'm British, but I don't mind being referred to as Irish. Being from Northern Ireland confers an identity crisis with respect to nationality: not so much a crisis… more like the luxury of having a reversible jacket. Yes, the landscape and its flora are important to me. Like many other poets, my favorite bit of Ireland is the ruggedly beautiful west coast, especially Donegal. Any Irishness in my poetry would be the occasional use of local words or phrases. Otherwise, my inclination towards rhyme and form, including some light verse, probably looks more towards English poetry, than contemporary Irish poetry.

**LV**. I have been deeply impressed by the quality of your images, which all quiver with emotion, with delicate life, with the fear of loss and the joy of beauty caught in time, just in time. Gardens must have taught you the frailty of flowers and the beautiful expectation of summer, the pang of autumn. You are so sensitive to seasons, both in poetry and in life, I think. What is more fulfilling to you, being a poet or being a 'gardener'?

**JB**. Again, thanks for those sentiments, Lidia. It is so gratifying to feel that my poems have yielded them! I have experienced the pleasure of propagating plants, and did have a flower-filled garden for a few years, but I have retreated into being an armchair gardener: I read and write about it rather than do it. Currently, poetry is much more fulfilling. Also, a garden being reclaimed by nature, as mine is, can be both fascinating and stimulating.

**LV**. A Desperado poet professes to be totally honest while keeping to himself most of his experiences. They hide the beauty and spit out the bitter seed of pain, of shocking ugliness at times. You strike a balance between the two: you hide yourself but share your moods, which is what poetry basically does, of course, but to various degrees. Should poetry be a diary of experience or a tapestry of emotionally tinged words? What is, to you, the aim of a poem? How do you connect with your reader?

**JB**. Yes, I think there is an element of camouflage in my poetry. I'm inclined to hide behind the greenery! A diary of experience is too telling. Poems are little slices, a bit like slides viewed under the microscope. The poet invites the reader to look, and interpret. Hopefully, the reader will want to (and be able to) imagine the milieu from which the slice was taken. A good poem should have a physical effect on the reader; some minor autonomic (gut, respiratory, vascular or goosebump) response which the brain has to rationalise. In my own poetry, I hope I'm kindly disposed towards the reader.

**LV**. Criticism, Eliot used to say, is 'as inevitable as breathing'. What kind of critics do you like? Scholarly, impressionistic, commonsensical? What do you think of such a term as Postmodernism (which I am trying to avoid when I use the label Desperado)?

**JB**. I enjoy reading poetry reviews and criticism, and regard it as an integral part of my poetry education. Criticism should be informative and entertaining, and a cocktail of all the above adjectives. I have no academic background in English literature. Sometimes that feels like a handicap. More often, it feels liberating to be able to distance myself from a concept such as Postmodernism. To imply that poetry can be split into a before and an after seems very suspect. Desperado is a much more flexible term. It respects the outsider/loner status of the poet.

**LV**. When a book comes out about your poetry, how would you like it to be? What language should it use? Is criticism literature, do you think, or is it meant to dissect a work and express its ideas with mathematical precision, in which words become figures and are impersonal? Do you read books of criticism? Who are your favorite critics?
**JB**. I can't imagine anyone wanting to write or read a book about my poetry! I think the language of criticism should attempt to match the language of the poetry. A very superior tone is off-putting. Good criticism is certainly good literature, but the sense of an analytical mind is reassuring for the reader. Being opinionated and feisty is ok too. Being witty is a great bonus. I do see criticism as dissection. But it differs from plant/animal dissections in that (a) there is no dissection guide book; the points of reference are very subjective, and (b) a plant or animal can only be dissected once. I probably read and enjoy more poet-critics, like Carol Rumens, Dennis O'Driscoll, Sean O'Brien and David Wheatley, than non-poet-critics. I am familiar with some of Edna Longley's writings and admire her vice-like grip of the subject

matter, her opinionativeness and those wickedly witty, sometimes hilarious asides. But I rarely feel like her addressee. Her audience is academia. I have also enjoyed essays by Randall Jarrell and Marianne Moore.

**LV**. When you read poetry, what poets do you choose? Do you ever write a poem starting from another poem?

**JB**. Louis MacNeice is my favorite Irish poet, especially for the sound effects. I like Hardy and Frost, but Elizabeth Bishop is the poet I have read most attentively. From contemporary poetry, I enjoy Carol's lyricism and formal skills. Also Bernard O'Donoghue, for his ability to affect the reader so deeply with such deceptively simple rural tales. But really I read and admire a great number of poets, from Ireland and far beyond. I have an extensive poetry library and also use the internet.

So far, I have only written one poem in response to another. It's called 'Afterwards' and is a housewife's version of Hardy's reflections on what people will say about him when he is dead. As it is only four lines, may I include it?

When I'm gone – when they gather round and see the grey
Gradation up the curtains, the mugs' brown rings,
The dust, the clutter, the tacky vinyl – will the  neighbors say
'She was a woman who never noticed such things'?

Otherwise, Elizabeth Bishop's wonderful 'Poem' is the source of my desire to write poems about paintings.

**LV**. Are you familiar with the literary life? You say you are a friend of Carol Rumens'. Who else is your friend, whom do you feel akin to?

**JB**. Fortunately, there are quite a lot of poetry readings and other literary events in Belfast, and I also assist in the organisation of an annual literary festival, *Between the Lines*. Carol is a great teacher. I was very fortunate to encounter her at the start of my interest in poetry. It saved a lot of time and frustration. She remains a good friend, to my poems and me. Sinéad Morrissey, Leontia Flynn and Paula Cunningham are among the younger and very talented poets I meet with in Belfast and whose critical skills I employ, from time to time.

**LV**. If you were to start all over again, would you take poetry as your main occupation, would you change anything in your life?

**JB**. No, I wouldn’t change anything. Much of my poetry depends on what came before, in terms of both experience and vocabulary.

**LV**. Since you already have a very comprehensive interview with John Brown, I wonder: Is there any question that you would have liked to be asked but have not been, yet? What is it your readers ought to know first about you?

**JB**. I can’t think of any other questions, but I’d like my readers to know that above all, I love words: on the tongue, on the ear and on the page.

February 3, 2003

## Alan Brownjohn, *When they clearly* understand *what I am saying I am happy – whether they like the poetry or not*

Three interviews with **ALAN BROWNJOHN** (born 28 July 1931), British poet, novelist and critic

**LIDIA VIANU**: I believe you, Alan Brownjohn, to be one of the chivalrous Desperadoes of poetry at the turn of this millennium. Your poems are at the same time entreating and baffling. You are the patron of the North and of the South Pole of sensibility, with the Equator of scorching feeling in between. When did it first occur to you to breathe into poetry?

**ALAN BROWNJOHN**: At the age of five, the poems my mother read and/or sang to me (Edward Lear's 'The Owl and the Pussy-cat' remains my favorite poem) and the poems one schoolmistress read to us – these seemed to me to have sharper, clearer, more beautiful images of the world, real or unreal, than the actual world. Mrs. Palmer (the schoolmistress) made the dog in Walter de la Mare's poem 'Silver' sound better than a real dog, a *perfect* representation of a dog. How wonderful it was that you could hear and see a dog *in words* and did not have to go out into the street and look for a dog.

Shortly after those experiences I began to realise that it might be possible for me to *make* the words which would preserve those pictures – and stories – for me, and provide them for other people. That is how 'breathing' in poetry began for me. Anything 'baffling' comes *much* later. At the beginning, everything was simple. Not easy, but simple and clear.

**LV.** Your poems abound in words synonymous with 'blank.' It is obvious that, against Eliot and Eliotians, you try to pretend emotion is dumb, although your lines are in fact extremely eloquent, dressed as they are in everyday words. How do you think you reconcile the apparent silence of your poems and the inner turmoil which they betray? Do you imagine that whoever reads you will be fooled by this veil of shy blankness?

**AB**. I feel sure that I derive some of my understatement (which sometimes borders on the negativity of early Eliot) from Eliot, the poet of our time I first read when I discovered modern poetry. I have always tried, or felt I have done best *when* I tried, to let the strength of a poem (if it has any strength) emerge at a second or third reading, not a first. I do not believe in violently direct, or shocking, poetry (or prose for that matter). I hope that the inner turmoil – which is indeed there – will be apparent when readers think carefully about what I am saying. So, if you like, what you cite as a 'shy blankness' is a veil which I hope the readers will feel persuaded to lift. The idea of a veil irresistibly brings to

mind Keats' great passage about the goddess in *The Fall of Hyperion*. Veils are used to conceal interesting mysteries which should be clear when they are lifted.

**LV.** You are a novelist as well as a poet. Do you admit that contemporary literature mixes genres, discovering a kind of fictionalized poetry, which tells a story in terms of small, shy emotions, which build guidelines? When you say you do not believe in 'shocking poetry,' is it an admission that you prefer it filtered by fiction?

**AB**. I am not sure that fiction and poetry have come closer in recent years. There have been superficial changes in the *form* of fiction, although fundamentally the task of a novel, or a fiction – call it what you like! – is to tell a story; or that's one of the main tasks which writers ignore at their peril. Poetry must be primarily about catching the essence of something, not necessarily via narrative.

By implication a 'poetic' novel has less of a story to tell, is more like an extended poem. I don't find the fully poetic novel very interesting. I don't find the indulgence of formal 'originality' in fiction very fruitful, unless those basic elements – story, character, place – are still indubitably there (as they were in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or even Nabokov, and *certainly* in Anthony Powell – and Proust! – Saul Bellow and John Updike).

Isn't the answer simple? Poetry comes in a small, concentrated bottle, fiction is a much larger one, to be drunk more slowly – but drunk completely to obtain the full effect. I make both items sound like medicines. I don't mind that. The world can be a sick and strange place, and the arts, as well as giving pleasure, can be medicinal. I won't get deeply into matters like catharsis...

**LV**. Would you subscribe to any literary label out of your own free will? I have called contemporary writers Desperadoes because everyone is trying to be their own trend. Can you look in your poetic – and intellectual, on the whole – mirror, in order to say what you see? You *are* your own trend. Would you venture to give it a name? Or is it like the 'naming of cats,' a heresy?

**AB**. One does not get a chance to dispute literary labels (or one does, but one disputes them in vain!). But I cannot complain about any that have been applied to me, for example 'post-Movement,' to describe poets who followed the 1950s 'Movement' in British poetry, were influenced by its attitudes and forms and yet were crucially different. When I look in my mirror – or look over past work and try to understand what I was doing and, more significantly, whether I *understood* what I was doing, I see (or I think I see) a label like 'moral concern' stuck to it, and under that heading, 'attention to detail' and 'striving for truth' and 'irony' and 'comedy' appearing in the smaller print of the list of contents/ingredients. I don't think giving a name to trends is a heresy – it's inevitable, anyway. Of course we more and

more need the labels so as to gain a grip on the volume and variety of what is being written – with the labels in our minds we can then start to read, and think, and differentiate for ourselves.

**LV**. What is your relationship to T.S. Eliot's poetry? You quote him here and there. On the other hand, your concealing (though apparently candid) verses seem determined to push him away. You reject, I think, Eliot's encoded concentration of emotions. You choose to deal with emotion in what looks like everyday words. Yet, whoever reads you carefully realizes that you do have your own tricks. Are you the generation that inaugurated the reaction against Eliot? Have you made your peace with him? Do you still read him? Do you think he would enjoy reading you? Or approve of what you do? Do you care?
**AB**. T.S. Eliot provided my own introduction to modern poetry – I read the first cheap edition of his poems while on holiday with my parents in summer 1948 or 49 (whenever it was, it was my last full holiday by the sea with them). Eliot made an immediately overwhelming impression, an excellent illustration of his own dictum (only found much later) that 'true poetry can communicate before it is understood' (quoting from memory). His rhythms and images (diluted versions of them) were in my own early verse, only gradually yielding to influences like Dylan Thomas and William Empson (very little) and Philip Larkin (much more). I took up Eliot's diffidence, and have never wholly lost that, in poetry or fiction. My 'everyday' words are my own kind of code, I suppose – Eliot's reticence but not much of his tone. I never consciously rebelled against Eliot, and I don't feel many later poets have (as they did against Yeats, for example). Probably most poets just left Eliot aside and listened harder to other great poets of their period. I've never felt I had to 'make peace' with Eliot – I'd never had his politics or religion, so there was no intense acceptance followed by a rejection. He is just always there as a magnificent, exemplary poet (I do still read him and would like to think he would have time for my work if he were still alive). I still find – unfashionable view, increasingly, his criticism valuable also, the rather puritanical drift of it!

**LV**. Do you think you belong to any group at all, or are you alone in the world of literary trends?

**AB.** I feel I am 'post-Group' (the London 'Group' of the 50s and 60s) and post-Movement.

**LV**. What present poets do you relate to? Whom do you value, whom do you feel akin to?

**AB**. As an older writer I look mostly to my own seniors – but get pleasure from the work of younger contemporaries in England/Britain like (some are fairly new names) Paul Farley, Douglas Dunn and Seamus Heaney (both *'of course'*), Ian Duhig (a wonderful and serious intellectual joker), Conor O'Callaghan, Paul Summers – some are *very* new poets I've been reading recently.

**LV**. How far from Eliot have you travelled? Can he be said to be the skeleton in the closet of your poetry?

**AB**. We don’t revere Eliot enough nowadays!

**LV.** What is the future of poetry, in your opinion as a poet at the turn of the century?

**AB**. Poetry has a future as long as it retains a tough core of imagination and honesty and doesn’t surrender to either ideology or populism (populism is now the greater danger).

**LV.** If you were to start all over again, would you still be the writer you are, or do you have new strategies in mind?

**AB**. I would simply try to write more, and better, and concentrate on *creating*. There have been too many distractions!

**LV**. What is your major expectation from your audience? Have your readers ever made you feel happy you are a poet?

**AB**. When they clearly *understand* what I am saying I am happy – whether they like the poetry or not.

**LV**. Has your attitude to language changed, as compared to Eliot’s or Joyce’s?

**AB**. I don’t see language as a vehicle or opportunity for experiment – but as a means of understanding the world and the things in it. Heaney has a good sentence about poetry ‘as a representative of things in the world’ – very simple, terribly true.

**LV**. Is reading still popular or do you feel drowning in a world of screens and scripts?

**AB**. I don’t let myself be drowned by screens and scripts. I know very few poets who do that. In the end, you are alone with the words and ideas, however you put them down on paper or screen, and however you transmit them to an audience. (I believe the book will *always* be with us.)

1997-1998

## I’D LIKE CRITICS TO UNDERSTAND THE AIM A LITTLE BETTER

**LIDIA VIANU**: Could you list a few features of the Post-Movement, which you feel you illustrate in your poetry, fiction, criticism?

**ALAN BROWNJOHN**: ‘Post-Movement’ was a term coined by the poet and anthologist Edward Lucie-Smith to describe poetry subsequent to 1950s ‘Movement’ verse but partly deriving from it. Precise definition is difficult. But Lucie-Smith appears to have been thinking of qualities like care, precision, formal tidiness and a pragmatic, non-rhetorical, non-mystical approach to writing poetry. He is a friend, but later reviewed some work of mine very negatively so I’m glad he invented that useful category before that happened.

**LV**. What exactly did you mean by the title *The Way You Tell Them*?

**AB**. The novel revolves round the idea of joke-telling. It is said that the effectiveness of a joke depends on the way the teller delivers it: ‘It’s the way you tell them’ is an often-heard dictum. In using that title I also hoped to suggest that the ‘hero’ of the novel had *not* found the right way to tell his enemies what he thought of them, had in fact been corrupted and assimilated by them. Critics who disliked the novel still thought the way *I* told the jokes in it was acceptable.

**LV**. Does the title *To Clear the River* mean anything special to you? What is its symbolic value?

**AB**. When I wrote the words which provide the title I was making an ‘environmental’, ‘ecological’ point about clearing away waste and pollution so that genuine ‘life’ could flow freely.

**LV**. Who are the authors you think have influenced your poetry and fiction? Do you still see yourself as Post-Movement, in what you write now (year 2001)?

**AB**. Almost too many to name. I like to think that all of the great names have helped me, but it seems over-dignified (or just foolish) to start citing Shakespeare, Donne, etc, etc. Writers working in one’s own time are likely to be the most influential, including persons of my own generation; though Philip Larkin was ten years my senior, as was a personal friend, Martin Bell, met in the mid-1950s.

**LV**. What authors would you name as your literary friends?

**AB**. Bell was one, then Oxford contemporaries (in 1950-53) like Anthony Thwaite and George MacBeth, and people met a little later than that: Peter Porter, Dannie Abse, other poets working in the London of my early manhood. Too many names, and I apologise to anyone who is a close friend that I've overlooked him/her.
**LV**. How much of your private life is included in what you write? You are not at all autobiographical, but you certainly rely on your experiences. Could you name a few, and the way they became poems or characters?

**AB**. Not a lot. It's all altered, modified, improved. Certainly 'observation' experiences – things seen and heard and noted down – are important. I am a diligent carrier of notebooks. Any ordinary experience may be improved and transmuted in this way if I feel inclined to write about it, in poetry or fiction.

**LV**. What are your expectations as far as the future of mankind is concerned? Are they dystopic? Are you an optimist? Your work is not serene. Are you?

**AB**. I am not an optimist, but not dystopic. I believe that effort, and common sense, and – not easy to say in an indulgent 'consumerist' age – contentment with *less*, in the material sense, will be necessary to save mankind, and that these energies and qualities are still possible to summon up. Not that enough people are trying very hard. No, I don't feel serene – I find most of life an effortful matter.

**LV**. What Romanian writers do you know and possibly appreciate? Has Romania been an essential experience or just a picturesque escape from western routine?

**AB**. An essential experience. I didn't expect that when I first visited the country, but it has become unexpectedly important. I'm reluctant to name very many individual Romanian writers, and perhaps won't cite living ones. Among modern writers, Nichita Stănescu, whom I just missed meeting, and Marin Sorescu, whom I knew, awed and impressed me. My own country is not and 'escape', so nor is Romania; emphatically not. There is 'stimulation' in seeing a different set of *problems* in a foreign country, and *interest* in that, but certainly not the tourist pleasure which the word 'picturesque' suggests.

**LV**. What is your favorite activity?

**AB**. Observing. As with ‘thinking’ (Iris Murdoch says this somewhere) it’s important not to let it turn into mere daydreaming.

**LV**. Do you write easily? Do you write much at once?

**AB**. No. Nice to think I could write a lot at once, but it’s not so. It’s a long, laborious process. I don’t enjoy it – unless I’ve really ‘got going’ and feel things are going well.

**LV**. When you look back at your work, are you satisfied you have expressed what you wanted to? Is the result of creation what you expect before you begin writing? Are you at peace with your achievement as a writer?

**AB**. Not easily. And not really satisfied. I think I get the result I intended (I don’t suffer from thinking ‘Oh, that doesn’t achieve what I wanted to’, which is more common when one is younger.) But is it a good enough result? And then ideas for *better* things occur... Being ‘at peace’ with what one writes would sound like complacency.

**LV**. I feel you are an essential pillar of Desperado literature, one on whom many features rest. Do you feel representative for your age? In what way?

**AB.** My father’s family was ‘upper working class.’ I represent a generation that was enabled to go to the university for the first time in its family history, so I’m representative in that sense: working-class boy that went to Oxford but maintained the political tradition of his family (democratic socialist), — though with a strong sense of the importance of ‘high’ culture, which I had before setting foot in Oxford. I don’t know what I would have been if I’d never been there. Possibly some sort of writer anyway, but perhaps not a poet.

**LV**. What do you value most in your work? Are you more of a poet or a novelist? What is your secret literary ambition to be?

**AB**. I like to feel it might be seen as ‘positive’, ‘humanistic’, ‘perceptive’ – it would be wonderful if critics saw all these things in it and also thought it was ‘profound’, ‘illuminating.’ But critics always fall crucially short in understanding these matters!

**LV**. Why are you so discreet in everything you write? Is it a mask or an impossibility of uttering directly what can be guessed?

**AB**. Because I prefer not to be crudely forthright. It's easy to win attention by being simplistic, in language, or in subject, or conclusions. I don't wish to be that. I would prefer not to have that kind of ignorant attention.

**LV**. Do you have a favorite critical approach? Your criticism is mainly thematic, I think. What do you think of the complicated dissection of a work? Does it make you angry or would you put up with anything, once the work is published?

**AB**. My approach is a somewhat 'watered-down' practical criticism (the only kind possible in literary journalism, and even then it's hard to keep it up in an increasingly insensitive atmosphere). I was a product of the 1950s, an age in which, in Britain and the US, the practitioners of literary criticism made large claims for its intellectual weight. Matthew Arnold wrote of poetry as 'a criticism of life' and critics like I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis made literature a criticism of modern mass civilisation. I still can't apply some of their rules, which people like Orwell developed and diversified. I like 'complicated dissections' as long as they say something; they are more likely to say something than 'theory'. Personally, I put up with anything once a work is published – except actual inaccuracies and misinterpretations which determine a critic's judgements.

**LV**. What is your political orientation? What do you expect of politics? What do you think of the ex-communist countries? What is the future power that will order the world?

**AB**. 'Democratic socialist' in the British Labour Party tradition (which is different from the 'New Labour' formulations of Tony Blair. That man has been a tragic disappointment – tepid ideology, vacuous rhetoric.) I don't know how else society can be organised except through politics, so I'm not an anarchist. Won't the future struggle in the ex-Communist countries be the same as in non-ex-Communist countries? Against a world order (imposed by the World Trade Organisation, or the EU. or the American Treasury) based on a 'freedom' which is really self-interest, rapacity, and a determination to sweep all opposition from its path?

**LV**. Are your very private experiences present in your poems in an encoded way? Could you point out a few significant instances?

**AB**. Sometimes, yes. But I'd rather they were decoded by others and then 'generalised', if they are sufficiently interesting for that treatment. What I experience privately will not be of interest because it happens to *me*, but because it can be experienced, or at least perceived, by others.

**LV**. Do you read much? What do you prefer to read, contemporary or earlier works, English or world literature? Are you a fast or slow reader?

**AB**. I am a slow reader of as much as I have time for, reading and re-reading classics and keeping up with as much recent writing as I can (too little).

**LV**. What do you expect from a novel? Do you like happy endings? Do you like endings at all? Should all novels be open, inconclusive? How did you mean yours to be?

**AB**. Representation of 'life' (that is being very 'Leavisite', but the notion governs my reading). I am not sure what a happy ending really is. Is it about lives appearing to be resolved, and stable, and secure? Not only about a kind of radiant, ongoing happiness (thus unreal)? If so, I like a great novel which can provide me with that. But which one can? My own novels (well, there are just three, or four if *To Clear the River* is included) all end ambivalently.

**LV**. Of what you have written, what book is the dearest to you? Why?

**AB.** I can't choose easily. Or at all. My first book of poems, *The Railings*, is such an agreeable memory – and its production was so good – that I'd probably put that one first.

**LV**. Do you feel criticism has done justice to your work?

**AB**. Sometimes I'm gratified by the tenacity and perception critics give my writing, but I'd like them to catch the general drift a bit more: the social criticism, the things I'm trying to do in the love poetry, the exact nature of the humour and irony I attempt. I don't say I succeed in doing any of this well, but I'd like critics to understand the aim a little better.

**LV**. Is poetry writing a matter of mood or systematic work?

**AB**. Systematic work. Mood is only important to me in starting a poem.

**LV**. You knew Philip Larkin. How well? What could you say about him as a man? As a poet? As a friend?

**AB**. Few people knew Philip *very* well (his women friends probably knew him best). Some knew him well, others fairly well. Others ‘fairly’. I put myself in that last group. We would always speak, gossip, joke if we met, but we didn’t have many arranged personal meetings. I was in awe of Philip, knew he had a frightening wit and pertinacity and rather feared that if we were serving (as we sometimes were) on literary committees together. I value the letters we exchanged; though those were brief in my case I could see what Robert Conquest meant when he referred to Philip as ‘a prince among letter-writers.’

**LV**. Do you write by hand, type or use a computer? Is it important to you how you put down your thoughts? Does creation have a ritual for you?

**AB**. By hand, in notebooks, or large writing pads for prose fiction. A third draft of any prose goes onto a typewriter or word-processor, but with poems that stage isn’t reached until near the end (tenth draft or thereabouts). We mustn’t be bullied (this is an age of awful techno-bullies) into writing by methods which persons marketing the new technology prefer. I was delighted to learn recently that some well-known literary journalists were still sending in their ‘copy’ in handwriting. I think W.H. Auden never learned to type? Some research into all this would be fascinating. Did Pasternak type?

**LV**. Why exactly did you become a writer? How did you write your first poem? Was that astonishing in any way? Are you happy you have followed this path?

**AB.** Growing up in a family (my father’s) of printers, I wanted to see my name on the spines of the kind of books they produced, or heading the articles in their magazines. Such imagination as I have probably came from my mother’s more chaotic (Irish) family, though my mother herself was one of its better-organised members. I started writing serious poems one night to leave something behind if I died of flu in my first winter at Oxford. That seemed likely to my nervous freshman imagination because I had literally the oldest (and what on that occasion seemed the coldest) room in Oxford.

**LV**. What are you working on now? What are your plans?

**AB**. I have ideas for a new novel, and the poems slowly go on. It’s all very usual.

**LV**. What is literature to you, as a poet, novelist, critic, and reader?

**AB**. Essential, nothing less.

*January 17, 2001*

## I DO NOT ENJOY SPECIALISED ACADEMIC CRITICISM

**LIDIA VIANU**: What are your earliest memories? Your family? Your first book? The time and times you first became aware of?

**ALAN BROWNJOHN**: I shall write about my earliest memories in a fairly factual way, seeking to be accurate rather than imaginative. I'm aware, from often in the past requiring students (men and women training to be teachers) to recall their own childhood and re-enter the experience, that it is possible to believe things one's parents said to be incidents that are actually *experience*; for example, mother saying, 'When you were two years old you were very fond of the friendly black cat that lived next door – thus I *create* a memory of stroking a black cat almost as large as myself when I have no genuine recollection of that.

My parents' little London house, and the flat where my father's parents lived, five minutes' walk away, are both vivid. Simple, true memories occur: a small, child-size cup I dropped in my grandmother's kitchen. Dropped twice, it broke the second time. I felt guilty about that and remember that as a personal feeling, *not* my grandmother's scolding. In my parents' scullery (as we called it) I hit our dog with a stick – it wailed, and slunk away. Again a (stronger) guilty feeling. No one around watching me, so I was responsible for that guilt.

Those two cases of guilt are my earliest memories. Soon after that there are far too many memories of both those households – all the rooms, and the gardens – to choose from. Innumerable memories of childhood sickness: eczema from about two years old, measles at three, asthma following on measles. Parents' natural anxiety, mother's *over*-anxiety, probably. Difference between a protective mother and an energetic father eager to cure my ills with exercise – this conflict between hypochondria and vigorous action has been with me all my life, I believe. How crucial parental influence is, from minute to minute!

But also grandparental influence. Wiry, energetic grandmother and robust, choleric grandfather – he had been an athlete as a young man in the 1890s, was a craftsman printer, was also self-educated with passionate left-wing political beliefs. As there were periods when I was left in their care, they were to me – their only grandchild, my father being *their* only child – very powerful presences.

My mother had had piano lessons, and I seem to remember they were intended to occupy her while she was pregnant. I am surprised now, almost seventy years later, to think how efficiently she played – not well, but very capably, with a good sight-reading ability. I still possess, somewhere, her piano sheet-music; including simple songs for children which she played and sang to me – one or two are almost unbearably moving for me to recall. I hardly dare to look at them now.

My father was the only child of a father who had a ‘hidden’ sister – I believed she was a remote cousin, but she was a *sister*, and she was in a mental asylum for the last several decades of her life, and rarely mentioned. She died as late as 1957, a date I was unaware of until I investigated the life of her one son two years ago (when *he* died). My mother was one of a family of seven, perhaps eight, children, of Irish ancestry (name: Mulligan). But they had no Irish accent, no trace of Irish religion – they seem to me, in retrospect, to have been ‘assimilated’ working-class Londoners (so both sides of my family had deep roots in London). My uncles, and my aunts’ husbands worked on buses, or in similar humble but essential services. There developed an interest in café work – two or three of my cousins acquired cafés or restaurants and became very prosperous. My childhood was full of regular visits to the *many* relations on both sides of my family. As children will, I began to distinguish between those who welcomed and liked me and those who were merely indifferent – children *of course* know the uncle who *always* passes on a gift of money when they leave and those who *never* do that.

I shall abandon my ‘earliest memories’ at this point in case they turn into the first draft of a full-scale childhood autobiography. I have dealt with my family in the course of recovering those early memories, so will say no more about that except that I received constant encouragement, from my father in particular, about reading and writing, and remember being praised by teachers from the beginning – singled out for my precocity as a reader and writer from the age of five. This is not a boast, but a fact. It is also a fact that I was profoundly impractical, could never *make* anything or repair anything, understand anything that required mechanical or technical or technological knowledge. Hence I write these memoirs and send them by letter, instead of typing on a computer and transmitting by e-mail. I am not proud of these inabilities, just complacent about them.

My first ‘book’ was a (now rare) 20-page booklet, *Travellers Alone*, published in 1954 by the Heron Press in Liverpool (who brought out a small, short-lived poetry magazine called *Artisan).* I was very grateful to them, and regret very much that I completely lost contact with my editor, Robert Cooper, in later years. My first book in covers (hardback) came seven years after that, after rejections from several publishers. My friend Peter Digby Smith published

it at the Digby Press. It was, as far as I know, the only book he ever published. He is now a teacher in France. It was probably the best-looking of any of my books, a handsome volume designed by Peter and myself using an excellent printer and high quality paper. Despite the smallness of the publisher, this book, *The Railings*, was widely reviewed and well-received; and it led on to a large publisher issuing my second book, *The Lions' Mouth*, six years later. How slowly I write – I am still painfully and guiltily slow.

'The times I first became aware of'? I take this to mean 'my world' in childhood. It was, of course, the frightening world of 1930s Europe into the horrors of World War I, a presence in the conversation of parents and grandparents, even though no one in my immediate family did military service of any kind – a question of age (grandfather was 40 in 1914, and was rejected on health grounds although he had been a formidable athlete; father was 38 in 1939. I was rejected on health grounds, in 1950, for compulsory military service. I was delighted, because I did not think I had the intellectual ability or the courage to face the 'panels' who interviewed those who applied *not* to do military service for pacifist reasons. I remain a pacifist in practice, but *theoretically* I believe that war might in some circumstances be just; the problem is I have never discovered, in my lifetime, something I could, in good conscience, describe as 'a just war'.

**LV.** You mentioned once briefly in a conversation your father being a printer. Could that account for your learning how to read when you were only five? You also mentioned the tremendous importance of radio broadcasts in your becoming not only aware but passionate about literature. Could you remember those times again in writing? The long hours you spent by the radio set and whom you listened to? What kind of a start in literature that offered?

**AB**. My father was a printer, so was his father, so was *his* father *and his* father. That is as far back as I can trace! My father and my grandfather (I knew my great-grandfather, but never had close contact with him and he died when I was five years old) both encouraged me to read.

My father passed me the newspapers across the table, and I can remember thinking that it was much easier for me to read books because I could hold a book in my two hands and had never managed to hold a newspaper open. My father was very eager that I should become interested in books, and passed to me all the books he had kept from his own childhood. It was not an immense number, but some of them were quite challenging books. They included classic boys' adventure stories and sea yarns. But he also gave me *Gulliver's Travels.*

In a sense, my grandfather was even more important, because he took me to the local public library and signed me up as a member. I think this was purely because my grandparents had to spend a lot of time looking after me during the Second World War, when both my parents had full-time jobs, and they wanted to keep me quiet and occupied. But my grandfather himself, although not an 'educated' man, was a wide and venturesome reader, and was always

recommending books that I could not possibly understand at the age of ten or eleven (such as T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism.*) I am not certain that he understood all of them himself. But his love of exploring ideas through books undoubtedly influenced him — and me — very greatly. My grandfather was, though, quite a bad-tempered man (all shouting, never violence) so that I sometimes felt safer if I was absorbed in a book when he had one of his bad moods in the home.

My parents and my grandparents were all devoted radio listeners; and there was no television during the Second World War. We went to the cinema a lot (Grandad was keen on Laurel and Hardy films), and my childhood illnesses (asthma especially) meant that I spent time away from school at home, and listened avidly to radio plays and stories. Radio drama of any kind came to be very important for me, as did music. There was comparatively little poetry on radio, but I can remember responding to it very eagerly when I did hear some. All of this was crucial in helping me to enjoy literature. I kept a notebook of radio plays I had heard, allocating marks to them, out of twenty. In that way I became acquainted with Shakespeare plays (I gave him high marks) and much modern drama.

**LV**. Did you begin writing as a poet or a novelist, then? Do you happen to remember what it felt like to put pen to paper for the first time, and then to reread your own text? Did you feel it would lead to a lifelong career? Were you intimidated by your first fight with the dragon?

**AB**. In my earlier childhood, from the age of nine, I wanted to be a novelist. I began by telling stories to friends and occasionally trying to write them down. So that putting pen to paper for the first time was a matter of beginning the first chapter with a suitable opening. I can remember very little about those stories except that some of them contained —this sounds rather up-to-date! — a dashing woman detective. I think there was such a character in one of the serial stories I was reading in a children's magazine at the time, *Film Fun*. None of this work survives in writing, only in my memory. Including the name of the detective: Jean Vane.

I wrote a lengthy diary during my teenage years from 15 to 19 years old, so most of my literary effort went into that activity. The diary sometimes broke into poetry, when I felt I had personal feelings to express or stories to tell which could be turned into verse.

Poetry only truly began when I became a student at Oxford. It came out of my early loneliness at the university, but I soon discovered that several fellow students were writing verse. We began to meet and exchange enthusiasms and encourage each other, so the whole desire to continue as a poet began there. Many of those students later became lifelong poets, and I was absolutely convinced that poetry would then be a lifelong career.

**LV**. You often say your are Post-Movement, but not many people know what the Movement meant and what writers it included. Whom did you look up to, what beliefs made them stick together, what made the Movement a distinct grouping, and why do you think so few critics talk about it now? Where and when should it be placed? Who initiated it? Which of those writers were your friends, what did you learn from them? What differentiates the Movement form the Post-Movement? Did they come right after Modernism? Is Postmodernism a label you would use?

**AB**. The idea that I was Post-Movement came from the editor of one particular anthology, but I accepted that category at once. The Movement is thoroughly covered in Blake Morrison's book about it, which will provide all the information about the writers involved, including what I myself said and wrote about it at the time (the mid-1950s). The writers of the Movement were roughly a decade later than myself and my student poet friends. The principal ones among them were Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Thom Gunn, John Wain and Elizabeth Jennings (but all of this is in Morrison's excellent guide to the period). Generally speaking, it was a 1950s mode of writing which favoured formal techniques, and an empirical and commonsense approach to life, and was in one critic's words 'sceptical, robust, ironic'. These writers were certainly sceptical about some aspects of modernism, though most of them revered Eliot, Joyce and Yeats (though *not* Ezra Pound).

**LV**. Would you give your own definition of the Movement? What were the formal features that made it a movement? What characterized the Post-Movement?

**AB**. Briefly, I would say that it represented a return to regular forms in poetry, a rational approach to subject-matter and a general no-nonsense attitude in contrast to the freer, wilder poetry of the previous decade (a Neo-Romantic period). The Post-Movement idea was coined by Edward Lucie-Smith for his book, and is a useful term, but it has not been taken up very much. It signified a variety of poetry that respected the formal care and the emotional restraint of the Movement but diversified things a little by simply being less *academic* (many of the Movement poets had been university lecturers) and more concerned with daily life. But all the information you really need is in Morrison's book. (I gave him *days* of help!)

**LV.** Who were your mentors? Whom did you befriend when you became a young published poet?

**AB**. My living mentors were any older poet whose work I admired when I was young: T.S. Eliot, Auden, MacNeice, Dylan Thomas a little, George Barker and then Larkin. I consider that I learnt a lot from each of those. My poetry friends when young were people of the same age as myself — I have spoken of Porter, Thwaite, Redgrove and Martin Bell (though he was ten years older), Elizabteh Jennings (a Movement poet. Died 2002).

**LV**. Your respect for your readers is immense. This is the cause, I think, of your wonderful clarity, which hides unsuspected depths of ambiguity, though. Do you like poems which do not make sense, or not easily? Must the reader work his soul out in order to find out the poet's intention (if he does)?

**AB**. I do tend to prefer poems which *do* make sense, and I become impatient with poetry that seems to me to wallow in abstraction. The idea of 'concrete imagery' has always seemed important to me. But if a poet is difficult to understand and yet still seems to be working in a recognisably real world with strong qualities of imagination, then I am drawn to him or her. Notable among these is the American John Ashbery, whom many of my poet friends find impossible! I believe Ashbery opens up the imagination in new and fascinating ways.

So I end up in favour of working hard to understand a particular poet, if there is clearly a powerful imagination at work among all the difficulty.

**LV**. One day, when leaving my apartment, you gazed at me sadly and whispered: 'You think of me so much more than I think myself...' I do think the world of you. You are shy and yet endlessly bold in your meanings. You are at the same time personal and impersonal. Your experiences are in your poems, but your biography is not. Eliot insisted on impersonality, yet never got there in his poems. Neither do you, thank God. You are *the* poet of this generation. I just wonder: what place do you allow yourself in your age? Who do you think you are in today's poetic landscape?

**AB**. As I grow older I cease trying to work out what place I do have in the English poetry of today. I suppose I could allow the labels of Post-Movement and 'the Group' to be applied to me for want of anything better. If obliged to attempt to place myself, I think I would like to belong to a tradition of English poets who write with a care for form and feeling, a degree of wit and irony, if possible, and without too much wild excess. Names like Edward Thomas, MacNeice and the others I mentioned immediately come to mind. (I do realise Eliot was American, MacNeice Northern Irish, etc.!)

**LV**. Clear language does not mean clear poem. Your poetic ambiguity is always present. But you do want your audience (which Eliot and Joyce almost lost), and you are aware of that. How far are you prepared to go in securing the reader's sympathy and empathy?

**AB**. The strange thing is that writers like T.S. Eliot and James Joyce probably believed that readers would come to them, and understand them, without their having to make concessions. I come increasingly to the conclusion that the audience for poetry, or fiction, or drama, or films has lost too much of its power of concentration. Easy sensation has

been too readily offered to them and they have too readily accepted it. Having said that, I am bound to report that with a minority of young students I meet, I detect a considerable ability to work hard at understanding current poetry, fiction, music, etc. So perhaps the people prepared to make the effort were *always* a minority, and that minority is a persistent group which will always exist — just call it intelligent people, if you like!

**LV**. Discussing your poetry with my students, we started talking about what they expected of a poet today. The general reaction was they wanted a personal connection with the poet, they wanted to share the poet's soul, know as much as possible about his life. Most poets today – so much like Eliot of old – try to escape their life and flee to poetry. You do not do exactly that. But you do keep your life private. What do you think of my students' desire to know more about you? As your reader, I have experienced that frustration myself. Is that the wrong way to read you?

**AB**. I consider that the poetry should come first, and knowledge of the life should only be used if it is a genuine aid to understanding the verse. X may be an admirable poet but not a pleasant man – in that case we should forget the life and appreciate X's poetry. Myself, I shall be willing to divulge some personal information *if it helps*, but most of it I should prefer to leave to a biographer (if there is one!) after my death. And then, some of my poetry is oblique, and 'fictional', with origins in my experience but not much direct reference to it.

**LV**. You speak tenderly and appreciatively of Larkin. What other writers are your friends today? What critics do you favour?

**AB**. My main poetry friends are Anthony Thwaite, Peter Porter, not to a lesser extent – because I see them less – George Szirtes, Peter Scupham and Douglas Dunn, all over 55 years old. There are younger poets I do meet privately (not just at parties and lunches): Paul Farley (best younger poet, in my opinion), Jane Griffiths, etc.

**LV**. Since you are a critic yourself and have written a lot of critical essays and reviews, what do you expect from a critic? What do you think of specialized academic criticism? Is criticism literature?

**AB**. I expect rigorous standards, a sense of urgency about poets' respect for language, a sense of justice (which might mean mercy sometimes), a bit of courage, a wide knowledge, a sensitive intelligence. I do not enjoy specialised academic criticism, particularly if it has been influenced by post-structuralism and post-modernism. But individual poets' worth is generally ignored or despised by post-modernist critics. It is not *criticism*! Yes, a few critics have been great – Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, and the deeply controversial F.R. Leavis, whose harshness blinds

people to the immense sensitivity of his detailed criticism. Leavis on Shakespeare, G.M. Hopkins and D.H. Lawrence is wonderful.

**LV**. Since you have visited Romania many times, what Romanian authors do you favour, what critics, what translators? What does Romania mean to you?

**AB.** There have been very good translations of Romanian poetry into English, so I can mention Eminescu, Arghezi, Nichita Stănescu, Marin Sorescu – only the beginning of a long list. But we do not have enough fiction in English – I have read only one novel – one! – in English, and that is D.R. Popescu's *Vânătoarea regală*: *The Royal Hunt*. And then the plays of Caragiale are not frequently translated. Perhaps the verbal humour of the Romanian context is untranslatable? That does not mean translators should not try.

February 2003

## Catherine Byron, *The best critic is the editor within*

Interview with **CATHERINE BYRON** (born 22 August 1947), Irish poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** You are Irish and a poet, which, together with some of your lines, brings Yeats to mind. Is he a model?

**CATHERINE BYRON:** An inspiration from very early on, rather than a model. What I admire most about his work is his continual re-invention of his poetry, both in content and in style, and the way it becomes ever more pared down.

**LV**. Seamus Heaney is partly the subject of a splendid pilgrimage book (*Out of Step*), which is as much personal as literary. Is he a model in any way, or just a literary love?

**CB.** Heaney's work was extremely important to me at the time I began to write seriously, in the early 1980s. His interest in the rural chimed in with my own interest in my mother's family history and the family farm in East Galway. I loved the clumpiness of his language in the early books, too: like him I studied Anglo-Saxon poetry at university, and wanted to emulate that concentration of poetic diction. *Out of Step: Pursuing Seamus Heaney to Purgatory* records my painful realization that I need to move myself and my writing away from his influence: as male poet and as self-appointed bard of the Irish people.

**LV**. What do you expect poetry to be and do? Should it be crystal clear or veil its emotions in cultured lines?

**CB.** Yeats wrote that 'there is more enterprise in walking naked'. I agree with this, and in my poetry I can trace a continuity from the self-consciously poetic to a more direct, natural syntax based on the voice. On the other hand, I hope that while my diction may flow more naturally, my poems contain greater depths of meaning and emotion: this is a paradox I try to enact in my writing!

**LV**. In *Redemption: A Litany* we read: 'I am an archivist of dreams'. Your poems are all veiled dreams, more or less. They have a halo of unreality, which masks the intensity that caused them. What can you reveal of the real life that lies hidden? Your family background, your marriage (followed by separation, much later), your daughters, your profession?

**CB.** When I assembled my first collection, *Settlements*, in 1985, I was quite shocked to realize that it was 'really' about the breakdown of my marriage! I write in a 'cloud of unknowing': I think of poetry as a method of divination, of truth-telling to the self. I still discover unexpected things in poems I wrote twenty years ago!

**LV**. Why poetry? What made you choose words as your medium?

**CB.** Poetry chose me! I would love to have been a visual artist, and wanted to go to Art school, not university. But my father, an eminent research physiologist, would not hear of it. He wanted me to study medicine, of course. Instead, I studied Classics and then English Language and Literature.

**LV**. I have found a stanza that perfectly defines your poetry, to my mind, as a mass of words carved in living flesh. Here it is:

*The Getting of Vellum*

Have you ever scribbled a telephone number, or a name
on the handy back of your hand?
Written something there on your own soft skin,
pressed and tickled across the grain of you
with the fine running point of a ballpoint pen?
It has the right ink that'll slide on
oily and easy, and stay there for hours.
Even a soapy scrub of your hand
won't shift it altogether.
Its perfect for jotting something down
in a hurry, something you need to hold onto
oh, for less than a day, maybe,
but vital for that day.
Paper is flighty, easy to lose,
and it isn't always to hand.
You'll not, after all, mislay
your own skin – will you?

You write, as Yeats put it, ‘in the marrow bone’. This connects you to him. Is biography a safe or advisable refuge for poetry? Do you use it much? I have not come to know much of your life after reading your poetry, but I do know your emotions, and that means your goal was reached, I guess. Yet, what do you think of autobiographical poems?

**CB.** Your questions are fascinating, and get very close to the marrow bone themselves! My introductory essay to my recent PhD by Published Works reflected on this interface between autobiography and fiction in my work. I think that I tend to start from stories that I have heard from others, and make connections – emotional connections – with my own experience. Hence my ‘Galway’ sequence based on tales I heard from my mother and aunts. Another instance is ‘Let-Down’: Poet Medbh McGuckian told me about her experience of getting engorged after giving birth to her first child, and her father, a rural man, telling her to think about the slow milking of a full-uddered cow: this helped her relax, and therefore let her baby suckle more effectively. I put that story alongside my own remembered pleasure in breastfeeding (without such problems!) and a personal memory of being taken to milk a cow while on holiday as a child in Donegal. The two tales together form a sort of fiction...

**LV**. In your book on Seamus Heaney ( who is more a pretext than a text, I feel), you confess:

> I am a foreigner there myself, half-English and half-Galway by blood, Belfast by raising; but Donegal is my country of the mind, and the physical country to which I keep returning from various and ever-changing exiles. It is the source-book of my identity, both as woman and as writer. Long-lapsed from the religious faith of my childhood, I come to Donegal for my own, usually solitary, retreats, and the land itself is my spiritual director – along, of course, with the ocean. As Alan Watts says of the motion of another ocean, the Pacific: ‘It harmonizes with our very breathing. It does not count our days.’

One feature of Desperado poetry – as I call it, because the term Postmodern is no longer significant to me, and because I have found a number of features that bring these poets together – is that it relies heavily on displacement, just as much as Desperado fiction. Displacement is a common feeling these days. We are all more or less displaced. Exile is our inner state most of the time. What is interesting about your poems is that your exile is at the same time emotional and intellectual. You feel displaced wherever you are and there is only one way to feel at home, for a brief space: writing poetry. Is that a wrong line to pursue in discussing your poetry?

**CB.** That is very interesting! I am not familiar with the term Desperado poetry, I'm afraid. But I think that poets generally are or would like to be 'outsiders' – especially in privileged Western democracies, where poetry, on the whole, is not any more central to the literary culture!

**LV**. The first words I could find to describe a Desperado is a writer similar to others in dissimilarity. Each Desperado wants to be his/ her own trend. How about you? Do you feel you belong to any group of writers or would you much rather be judged as your own person (which you are)?

**CB.** I am very proud to have my work included in the just-published *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* Vol. 5: *Irish Women's Writing and Tradition* (Cork University Press). And to have a poetry collection (*Vellum*) published at last by an Irish Press, Salmon. But it doesn't matter to me where I fit in, really. I have a loose collection of poets geographically near to me, and we meet to workshop our poems. They are of every sort of 'school' and style: two of them are gay men but write entirely differently from their respective 'out' positions: a Kenyan/Indian man who refuses to be pigeonholed as 'South Asian', though it would help his work to get about more widely; a woman scientist; a Protestant Irish woman who writes most lyrically and wickedly in a sort of ballad style; etc. etc. We are all entirely individual in our intentions and our work – and therefore (?) find that workshopping new poems together is very helpful!

**LV**. Contemporary feminine poetry, Desperado feminine poetry, is much stronger than feminine poetry ever was before. What is the cause of that, do you think?

**CB.** Well, women are gradually getting heard, and published, more. This has been much slower in Ireland, North and South, than in my adopted homes of Scotland and England.

**LV**. What is your attitude towards literary criticism? Should the poem leave room for it? Hadn't the poet better make himself totally understood and thus discourage interpretation? Or is interpretation absolutely necessary to the life of a poem? I am aware no poet can exist outside ambiguity. The question is, how far can he go, if he means to keep his audience by his side?

**CB.** I really think that the poet must not think of any critics, literary or reviewing, when writing. The best critic is the editor within, and even that editor needs to be kept switched off most of the time. Self-consciousness is a great enemy of poetry.

**LV**. A Desperado writer is a writer who takes the literary law in his hands and makes his own rules as he writes. He is an inventor of laws and rules. He needs to try what has not yet been tried. So do you. What is the major law of your poems, the one you always obey, and which is, I suppose, of your own making? I say this because yours is an indomitable poetry, which does not conform. You alone can tame it. How do you get your message through, what are your own devices, which you weave into the text?

**CB.** Each poem has to find its own form, and voice. I tend not to use traditional poetic/verse forms. I think of rhymed poetic forms as ‘invertebrate’, i.e. they wear their skeletons on the outside, e.g. like lobsters! I like to think of my poems as vertebrates: their formal skeleton is hidden inside their flesh, but it is none the less firm for that. And they take much of their suppleness and muscularity from speech, but artfully ‘boiled down’ to a sort of essence of speech. I like giving voices to characters, especially the ‘I’ who tells many of my tales. ‘I’ is not necessarily ‘Catherine Byron’! But I have also given voices to several distinct characters, such as the women (and some men) in the ‘Galway’ sequence, or the linen-weaver in ‘Shears’.

**LV**. When did you start writing poetry? What led to it? What incidents made your life cross that of a poem?

**CB.** I started when I was six, and continued until I was about twenty, when I met my husband. We married when we were 19 and 20, as students. I had this crazy idea that my urge to write poems was a sort of yearning that had been answered by meeting him! I did not write again until I had the dream that led to the poem ‘Night Flight to Belfast’ (*Settlements*) – that dream unlocked a great deal. I was living and farming in Scotland, and missing Ireland more and more, especially as it was engulfed in the chaos of the Troubles conflict. My uncle was murdered in Belfast in 1974, and it was soon after that that I had the dream.

**LV**. Obvious love poetry is not your favorite. Yet there is incandescent love in every line. It may be more love of words than of living beings that you express. I should say you are in love with life, on the whole. What do you love most about poetry? What do you love most in real life?

**CB.** Thank you for that sentence ‘Yet there is incandescent love in every line’ – that is a wonderful confirmation of my poetry, and what I hope to give the reader – along with the trouble and pain of human (and animal) existence. On a more literal level, I love the landscape of a particular peninsula in West Donegal as if it were a human lover. I love the wild wet world of plants and lichens – would love to have been trained as a botanical illustrator. I think that there is quite a lot of erotic content in my poems, especially the last book – troubled eroticism, perhaps? I’ve had a few excellent lovers in my time, but I mainly seem to write about the pain of love. I only began to write poetry again as my

marriage started to crumble, which perhaps suggests that I ‘imprinted on pain as my first lover’ in poetic terms as well as physical ones? I have been a fierce lover of my two daughters, now grown up, though I have not written very much about them, or about motherhood... The connections are subterranean, as predicted rather spookily by my early poem ‘Redemption: a Litany’ which is the intro poem to *Settlements*.

**LV**. What kind of literary criticism do you favour? I would like to know your opinion versus scholarly criticism, written in a largely inaccessible language, with words taken over from other critics and used just as figures in mathematics. Would you allow/ require criticism to be literature itself?

**CB.** I like some of the criticism that poets write, e.g. I think Seamus Heaney writes marvellously about other poets’ work. But on the whole I avoid reading Lit Crit. I prefer to read books of geology, chemistry, exploration, art, etc. ‘All trades, their gear and tackle and trim’, as Gerard Manley Hopkins has it in his poem ‘Pied Beauty’!

**LV**. Is the internet a good way of bringing writers together, or are you afraid that the screen might one day kill the pleasure of the book?

**CB.** Hmmm. Very big question. Too soon to say. I am loosely connected to *trace*, the internet community of writers based at my university: http://trace.ntu.ac.uk I think the codex book is such a wonderful piece of technology for the individual reader that it will not be easily superseded. Perhaps the Web will be another mode alongside, rather than a replacement. I hope so. Also, I am anxious about the fragility of the digital media – if the platform changes, or the links fray a bit, a work/text can simply be lost, after a few years, even a few months. The Lindisfarne Gospels, written circa 700 on calf vellum, survive in superb condition!

**LV**. Are interviews the right way to approach a writer? Should we be satisfied with what we see in his books? Are readers entitled to know more than just the written literary text about a writer whose fans they have become?

**CB.** I and many poet and reader friends love to go to poetry readings at which a poet talks around the work as well as performing it – we are hungry for the little nuggets of information, things very close to what you have asked me in this interview!

November 2002

## Andrei Codrescu, *The poetic activity consists in overthrowing poetry for its own sake*

Interview with **ANDREI CODRESCU** (born 20 December 1946), American poet, novelist, editor

**LIDIA VIANU:** Your poetry shows a long travel from innovation to innovation. You try new things (no capitals, lyrical prose, narrative in verse, masks, direct aggressive love poems, images, conversational verse). Yet you do not rebel against someone in particular, against a poet or a tradition. You somehow rebel against your own preconceived idea of poetry. You are an individualist through and through, to the extent of being free from your own self. What do you value most in a poem? Its genuine emotion, striking poetic language, defiance of the *déjà vu*?

**ANDREI CODRESCU:** That's a stellar cloud of questions. I like to stay amused. It has the word 'muse' in it. You are absolutely right that my own received and preconceived notions of poetry bore me. The poetic activity consists in overthrowing poetry for its own sake. The 'poetic,' I tell my students, 'is the enemy of poetry.' What I really mean to tell them is 'Poetry is the enemy of poetry.' I don't tell them because they already know that superficially, and I don't want to encourage superficiality in my field. They can stay superficial on their own turf. The way I see it, every poem is a complete critique of all poetry before it, whether the poet knows it or not. The fun begins when the poet knows it. The conversation that takes place is between the emerging poem and something outside language. Taking a position on behalf of the outside, any outside (of language, of culture, of various establishments and mainstreams) is vital. Vitality calls to eros, so at least one reason for the practice is the eroticisation of the universe. Gherasim Luca put it well, 'Eroticize the proletariat!' The materials of the work itself are available everywhere: street talk, popular culture, obtuse treatises, scientific discourses, public transportation, and art. There is a great cry for 'content' today from the ever-hungry media, but 'content' is a meaningless word. Everything is 'content.' But only poets are in full possession of it, because they are the only ones who move within the imaginary as easily as Hispanic maids move within the houses of the rich on Long Island.

**LV**. Your early poetry is faintly narrative, but very strongly populated with characters. Your later poetry builds your own mask, a tough mood which is unafraid of taboos. What is your opinion about the attempt at mixing literary genres, at hybridization? Could it be a common feature to very different poets, writing all over the world today?

**AC.** My religion is Creolisation, Hybridization, Miscegenation, Immigration, Genre-Busting, Trespassing, Border-Crossing, Identity-Shifting, Mask-Making, and Syncretism. I like the conventions of genre (gender) so that I may play

with them. American poetry is in full retrenchment right now from prankster saboteurs such as myself. There is even a 'new' movement, called 'New Formalism' that makes its practitioners rhyme in traditional forms. This school is the literary equivalent of right-wing ideology. In such times, the pursuit and release of liberty into the public air is fabulously tonic: it keeps young malcontents interested in poetry and defends eros against the conserving instincts of the terrified socius. My generation has been accused, among other things, of using more than our share of the libidinal reservoir of the race. Our conspicuous consumption has made the preceding generations timid, conservative with language and pleasure, afraid to travel too far. This is happily changing, as young people realize that the libidinal stores are infinite, and that the libidinal economy depends on the ability of the imagination to trespass, even to the point where it refuses to make images. My journal, *Exquisite Corpse*: a Journal of Life and Letters, on-line at: www.corpse.org , is a forum for the genre-gender busting. There are some images in it, though.

**LV**. You hate literary theory in the margin of real literature, and I do not blame the feeling. Yet, I would like to suggest a label for poets since the 1950s: I would like to group them under the name Desperadoes, meaning they are desperate to be their own poets, authors on their own, similar in dissimilarity. You fit the description. You reinvent poetry. How do you feel about being included in a group, even though on the basis of your not belonging to any classification?

**AC.** I dislike the term. I don't feel despair. In my work, I try to cultivate joy. Despair is a given, it seems to me, and its effects can be tonic (as in Cioran) if they are taken to the very bitter end of their logic. I find it necessary to reinvent myself, to be born again every morning (not always possible, alas!) – I've taken the American ideal literally. The New World has served this rebirthing function without surcease and it has given it boundless energy and huge creative resources. I like breaking things up because they release energy. My work is about play: take apart things to see what's in them, then use the parts to make something else, invite people over to play with you, stay up all night. If there is any 'despair,' it's the despair of limitations, the tragedy of physical limits, the fact that things end. I do like the Mexican sound of 'Desperado,' with its hint of bandido on horseback, Pancho Villa mustaches, and all. Maybe it would work, after all, if you used the metaphor to describe an undisciplined band of rowdy, drunken bandidos taking over a quaint midwestern campus. There are poets like that, but I'm not one of them.

**LV**. In *Testing. Testing*, you talk about 'the candles of my ideas.' Your poems rely on ideas far more than on imagery or musicality. You seem to despise the lullaby of rhyme, but you do have a devilish inner rhythm of thoughts. You are highly verbal in your intellectual and sensual lines. You play tricks and thrive on puns. Irony is your prize possession. All Desperadoes are first and foremost ironical. Logical conclusion: would you be a Desperado in that respect?

**AC.** You say such sexy things. You are right about every one of them. There is iron in 'irony' as everyone knows, but there are different ironies. Have you ever seen 'baby irony'? A baby smiles ironically and you realize that one of the terms of the comparison on which the ironic smile is built must be in another world. The lacking reference is not of this world. We can call this transcendental irony. One is being ironic on the basis of a pre-conscious or pre-human understanding. Then there is geriatric irony, the irony of the end, when one is, finally, ironic about everything because the truth of the matter lies beyond life. All the other ironies, the in-between ironies of the sexual ages, are at the service of seduction. Wit, charm, and wisdom at the service of Eros. These ironies are human, they belong to everyone, not just to poets; their practice is the practice of consciousness. Everyone's. I am very much at home in the human business. Maybe what looks like work is what I do without effort, without even noticing.

**LV**. One more Desperado feature is the use of four-letter words at ease. You do that, too. You are bold yet shy at the same time. Your language is bold, your sensibility shy. Your lines are warm, in spite of their biting irony, sarcastic at times. Your mind sparkles in the text. What meaning do you attribute to words such as decent and indecent? Do you mean to shock or are you just being yourself, an uninhibited, daring self?

**AC.** You make me blush. You are right, I am shy in person and bold in writing. The four-letter words are not used for shock-effect though. I use them for weight, for gravity, for emphasis or, on the contrary, because they are part of common speech and are used only as a kind of punctuation. Anyway, I don't use that many. My contemporaries are much more foul-mouthed. I prefer indecency to decency just as I prefer candor to disingenuity.

**LV**. One poem is entitled *Attempt to Spell, Incantate and Annoy*. You talk about the poem as a 'heresy.' So you do want to annoy and break faith. What is your poetic stand? Like all Desperadoes, you deny what is known. You also put something instead. What is your personal seal, the description you would like when it comes to your own poetry?

**AC.** I'll grant you, there is a good deal of respect for religious mystery in my work. It is not faith-specific or particularly taken with the dogmas of any particular belief. I like ritual without solemnity, mystery without pomp and trappings, yearning without reverence. This penchant is doubtlessly the result of having been born and raised in Sibiu, in earshot of bells, in sight of Gothic towers, and under the crepuscular influence of Lucian Blaga. On the other hand, there was also Baroque art in Sibiu, which balanced the extremism of Gothic with its pleasurable insistence on form, decoration, gaiety. My poetic stand, if you must have it, is Gothic Sibian Mozartian Dada.

**LV**. You are a fanatic fan of freedom. In *Junk Dawn, NYC*, you write: ‘there is nowhere to go/ save inside yourself: there everything/ is slightly demented and free.’ Does this have anything to do with your being born and spending your teenage years in a communist country? Linguistically you have grown into your language of adoption. Is there still anything left of your Romanian soul? Did communism exacerbate this wish to be and stay ‘demented and free’?

**AC.** I started writing poetry in Sibiu at the age of 16 in the early Sixties, and I knew from the very beginning that I was part of a revolutionary generation. The Romanian poets of my generation were overthrowing socialist-realism and reaching to the mystical and avantgarde pre-war poets. At the same time, our contemporaries in the Western world were beginning a social, political, philosophical, and literary revolt. On both sides of the so-called ‘Iron Curtain’ (by 1969 it became the ‘Ironic Curtain’) there was an energy of rebellion and desire for freedom. I was imbued with the esprit-du-temps, but I never understood freedom to mean the renunciation of anything I was or knew. On the contrary, this esprit demanded the fresh use of everything I knew and was, including Romanian, Jewish, Sibian, Pioneer (never made it to the U.T.C.), lover of mountains, sheep, and country girls. All of this was to be used, but not solemnly, piously, reverently or chauvinistically, but daringly, innovatively, freshly, generously. I perceive of differences as gifts, not barriers. I am a hunter of distinctions: the more the merrier. The more differences you can bring to the table, the more interesting the world becomes. In 1966 I assumed the identity of a woman poet named Maria Parfenie, whose poems were published and warmly introduced by M.R. Paraschivescu in ‘Contemporanul.’ I felt very much that I was this slightly naive, religious, sexy young woman. I knew that Gender-Genre in a more than perfunctory way. I later became other women and wrote their poetry. I was also a Puerto Rican terrorist, a lesbian, a fascist, and a monk.

**LV**. In *Opium for Britt Wilkie*, you reject the ‘melodramatic hearts’, which is again a Desperado reaction. Desperadoes smash love-interest in novels and in poetry. The feeling wears a scary mask, rejects soap-opera reactions from readers. Your love poems are not endearing, they are firm and create a certainty of the feeling, which you do not choose to utter, though. Are you a sentimental poet or do you see yourself as the cold juggler of words?

**AC.** I am neither sentimental nor cold. I prefer my love sexual, earthy, human. Sex is warm, funny, profound. Sentimentality is a form of fraud; in literature it extorts the reader’s emotional energy; in life it perpetuates lies. I am against Platonism in any shape or form, beginning with Plato himself (who justly threw the poets out of the Republic) to all the later meanings of the adjective. There was no ideal (‘platonic’) world before this one. Paradise is a pretty invention and utopia is an ugly lie. I believe neither in original sin nor in utopia. We make the world by being in it, playing in it, loving in it, having sex in it. One of my recordings is called ‘Plato Sucks.’ He does.

**LV**. In *Sadness Unhinged* you state 'I am not satisfied with ambiguity.' Desperadoes usually are not. They need to be clear. Clear, yet complicated. So are you. The image is like a bushy moustache, which you trim with the scissors of intelligence. Do you ever bet on the load of ambiguity of a line, or is it always directness of statement (supported by ironical understatement, of course)?

**AC.** The actual line is 'I am not satisfied with ambiguity/ it takes two of them to get me off.' That's a funny allusion to my favorite sexual pastime: threesomes. Of course, being ambiguous, they each divide in two or more, so we may be talking about a real fellinesque orgy. I love your mustache image, but I have shaved off my mustache in Venice in July 2000. My girlfriend was scared when she saw me. 'Why did you do it?' she asked, shading her eyes. 'Stalin is dead,' I said. 'Enough is enough.' All mustashes are stalinist. I had been carrying the shadow of my childhood around long enough. She's used to it now. I have a small goatee, like a goat, and a pristine upper lip. If the surface of the poem is like a roulette table, I like to put money on black or red (directness) and scatter some at random in the ambiguous universe of numbers. Luck is very important.

**LV**. In *Sunday Sermon*, you write: 'People who half-listen are half-inspiring'. How do you expect your reader to approach your text? With the same irony as yours, with sympathy, unconditional surrender, active denial? Are you a tyrannical author, unlike most Desperadoes, or do you welcome an ambiguous reading, ending, just like your poems, in a question mark? How do you feel about inconclusive texts (which poems should be, by definition) and inconclusive readings (half-readings, in a sense)?

**AC.** I am a tyrannical author of the most exacting sort. I expect my readers to understand my intentions, even when they are radically different from what they say, but mainly I expect them to surrender to the poem. I feel triumph when I am able to bypass quickly all their livresque critical objections and render them defenseless for the next line. I want to take them out of their minds so that they can understand (and approve) with their bodies. For this purpose, I have become quite a good reader. I can't leave the whole job to my written brilliance alone. All texts are inconclusive. On the other hand, texts that are purposefully inconclusive smack of unbearable self-importance. My least favorite orthographic symbol is the ellipsis. My skin crawls when I see ... at the end of a line. The assumption that the reader should be told that there is more to the universe than the pathetic piece of paper she has just honored with her attention, is an offense to all intelligent life. Of course the universe goes on when the text is finished. What moron thinks otherwise? I try to get as much as I can and end a text as well as I know how, but I won't commit hubris by withholding information, god forbid.

**LV**. In *Against Meaning*, you write ‘Everything I do is against meaning./ This is partly deliberate, mostly spontaneous.’ Your poetry is indeed a crusade against meanings, a search for the Grail of the absolute fresh meaning. You fight language to the least automatism and mock at comfortable statements. You are a highly uncomfortable poet, from the point of view of inert readers, who expect to be pleased, not challenged. This fight against the peace of reading is Desperado, again. Would you say you are at war just with language, or is it a vaster battle, against mentality, human nature, that you initiate?

**AC.** The only solution for ‘inert readers’ is to be dipped in saline solution and connected to electrical wires. If that doesn’t work, they should lose their ‘reader’ status and be made to work the copy machine. ‘Meaning’ is an arrogant claim of power. Authoritarian structures cannot function without fixed ‘meanings’; they draw occult power from them. Unsettling ‘meaning,’ knocking it off its ritual perches is the highest calling of a creative language user. Language is a battlefield: it is littered with the corpses of words killed by ideologies, strangled to death by advertising, assassinated by political opportunists, drowned in the urine of bureaucratic sadists. On this field, poets have the very big job of rendering the killers of words inefficient through paradox, irony, erudition, and sound. At the same time, they must save the still-living words from the intensifying hunt for them by the purveyors of ‘content.’ (Who are, sometimes, the same as the assassins above). The battlefield of language is also the battlefield of mentalities or ‘human nature,’ as you call it. ‘Human nature’ is generally used as a synonym for ‘stupidity.’ In that sense, yes, human nature is definitely to be overthrown.

**LV**. *Intention* ends with ‘Forgive us our intentions, dear reader.’ What are your intentions as a poet?

**AC.** I sort of listed them above, but in that particular poem I was referring to the unsavory intention of the poet to monopolize the attention of his readers/listeners and to relieve them of their minds, cash, and time.

**LV**. Your poems (*Franchising the Fight*) mention the ‘Exquisite Corpse’. It also is the title of your poetry review. What are your goals as an editor? What are you trying to achieve with your review? What kind of poetry do you promote?

**AC.** I started *Exquisite Corpse* in Baltimore in 1983 because I was bored with the low level of the intellectual conversation in the literary press of the time. Eventually, the journal evolved to find a tone and writers hip to the tone. Today it is still an organ of discovery (more than half our writers are unknowns who find us), an international anthology (we have published many Romanian poets, for instance), and a soapbox for the editor. (www.corpse.org)

**LV**. The *Juniata Diary* ends with: ‘I only take up the critic’s job to be an ontological reminder, to keep us (me) from forgetting the reason why we took up the art in the first place.’ I do not think you have a great liking for criticism, so I shall ask bluntly: What do you expect of your critics? Like a true Desperado, being an editor, you are a critic yourself. Being an ironical spirit, you are even twice a critic. What do you expect of yourself?

**AC.** I expect to stay awake; I expect to meet you some day.

January 31, 2001

## Julia Copus, *The more I write, the more I value clarity*

Interview with **JULIA COPUS** (born 16 July 1969), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: There are two directions — broadly speaking — in poetry today (as always): the clear and the encoded. I should say you belong to the first. You have confession, tenderness and also images that render the first two impersonal enough. Should poetry bar understanding? How do you feel about poets who do not care enough about their readers to help them understand?

**JULIA COPUS:** I'm not at all keen on obscurity — or even ambiguity — for its own sake. I'm not sure what the point of it is — although I know there are some who think there is a point. Some writers — the so-called 'Language Poets', for instance — work from the premise that the meaning of a poem lies in the interaction between writer and reader. They purposely leave the connections between various elements open, so that the reader is forced to produce those connections himself. Personally, I find that sort of approach irritating. I do find that the more I write, the more I value clarity and accuracy. After all, what's the point in saying something earth-shatteringly profound if no-one understands exactly what it is that you've said?

On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with asking the reader to work a bit — by which I mean asking him to read the poem *closely*. It's a shame when people feel that if a poem doesn't yield its whole meaning immediately, then it has failed in some way, because most poems worth their salt require re-reading. This seems self-evident to me: poetry is a very condensed genre. I think the *Poems on the Underground* initiative was an inspired idea for that reason: when you are sitting opposite a cluster of words for the whole length of a journey, then naturally you are drawn into reading and re-reading them.

I do try not to clog up my own poems with impenetrable allusions which one needs a battery of reference books to tackle, but some allusions occur naturally within the course of writing a poem. In general I think the poet's intention should be to assist the reader or to rouse his curiosity; not to annoy him.

**LV.** Do you favour confessional poetry? I must confess, when reading a poet's work (chronologically, which is how I try to do it when possible), I look anxiously for his life. Not the story of his life (although I love that, too) so much as the stuff his days are made of. You are both an enigma and a confession. How do you manage to blend the two?

**JC.** I suppose by 'confessional poetry' you mean poetry which has the writer's life as the central subject? I don't favour that type of poem over any other, and I don't see that there's any significant difference between a confessional poem and a non-confessional poem: in both cases the writer makes an artifice of honesty.

I certainly don't *try* to be an enigma. So it's not really a question of consciously trying to blend the two. I just think there are many different ways to tell a story, and in a poem I'm only interested in one particular slant on that story, which means that certain aspects inevitably get foregrounded and others are left out completely. A lot of my poems are about the way in which we write our own stories, the lies we tell ourselves, and the broken, human ways we find for coping with the choices we make. In *The Stone Diaries* Carol Shields says, 'Biography, even autobiography, is full of systemic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams.' For me, these 'errors' are often more meaningful than the so-called facts.

I'm also interested in what the quantum-physicists call 'shadow selves' — the idea that with every choice we make our world splinters off from another world in which we made the other choice. I don't know anything about the physics of it, but since the age of six — when my mother left home and took us with her — I have had this persistent feeling that there is another version of me who stayed behind at my father's house and went on living the life I really ought to be living — a life from which I'd somehow come adrift. Maybe the feeling was there even before that. I know that as an adult there have been several times when I've felt that same sensation, like a switch in the points, and the faintest awareness of another self chugging quietly off down a siding. My most recent book, *In Defence of Adultery*, is full of such moments — an alternative life glimpsed in the dust kicked up at someone's heel; a woman who walks out of a restaurant half way through dinner, leaving her other self at the table waiting for pudding…

**LV.** What should a poem do to the reader? Impress with emotion, offer a hard nut to crack, tempt with little stories?

**JC.** If the sound of a poem is sufficiently memorable that certain phrases lodge themselves in the reader's mind, and if the poem also succeeds in moving the reader in some way — so that it stays with him and, even if only in a tiny way, alters his perception of the world, like a dream he can't shake off — then I'd say it has done its job. Imagery is very important, I think. A brilliant image — like the pair of ragged claws in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* 'scuttling across the floors of silent seas' — is just very hard to forget. And because it provokes such a precise emotional response it seems to bring the whole of the rest of the poem to mind.

**LV.** What should poetry do if it means to survive, even broaden its audience?

**JC.** I think you have to start young, by getting people excited about poetry in the classroom. I have friends who are English teachers, and most (not all) of them know very few contemporary poems themselves, so how can they pass on

any sort of passion to the children they teach? But the worst thing is that they're not that enthused by the few poems they *do* come across — i.e. the poems they have to teach for GCSE — and on the whole I agree with them. It's frustrating for me, because I know how much really excellent poetry there is out there which would be suitable — and far more engaging — for this age-group. So I think perhaps the advisors for whatever government quango it is that chooses poetry for exam syllabuses ought to be replaced.

I also think some hard work has to be done to disseminate the good stuff, to get the best poems out there and known about. At the end of the day, that's the thing that's going to make the biggest difference to public perception. I've already mentioned *Poems on the Underground*. Serious anthologies (as opposed to those of the 101-poems-for-cats variety) can be very influential too, and are a good way of introducing people to a whole range of poets under one roof. For contemporary poetry, *Emergency Kit* (ed. Jo Shapcott and Matthew Sweeney) is one of my favourites. And Neil Astley's two anthologies — *Staying Alive* and *Being Alive* — have been very successful in attracting new readers to poetry.

But I do think it's an uphill struggle. People in other countries are far more passionate about poetry, and I'm not really sure why. Actually, even in Ireland poets are held in much higher esteem than they are here. There is an association of creative artists in Ireland called Aosdána, which exists solely to enable members to devote their energies to their art. And once elected, members receive an annual stipend for life. I can't imagine that sort of thing happening in England.

**LV**. How did you start writing poetry? Was it a childhood longing, or did you discover it at some point in your life?

**JC.** I first started writing 'seriously' (sending poems to magazines and so on) in my early twenties. The book that started that process off — the first poetry book I really fell in love with — was Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems*. I was twenty-two, and I'd never come across poems like these before — urgent, insistent, genuine, rhythmically supple. I've read other books since which have influenced me — probably far more usefully — but none that has provoked quite the same sort of exhilaration. Discovering poems like that is a rare experience, I think — like falling in love. It wakes something up inside you which until then you didn't realise had fallen asleep.

I did write a lot as a child too. I still remember a poem I wrote when I was five, and the drawing that went with it! That poem has some mad phrases in it which do make a kind of sense but only on a basic, sound level — a bit like the nonsense words in *Jabberwocky*. I think maybe young children have a natural gift for poetry which, sadly, they seem to lose as they get older.

**LV.** Do you write on paper or on the screen? Has the computer changed your life in any way, or do you ignore its advantages for the sake of the act of writing with pen on paper? Can the internet become stuff for poems?

**JC.** I write letters and articles on the screen, but not poetry. For one thing, I always write a lot of drafts, and when I do this, I like to write the whole poem out each time, in order both to fix it in my head and to see where my hand catches on the paper, so to speak — which words it snags on. It's also helpful to be able to look back at earlier drafts, and I can't imagine ever being organised enough to save successive drafts on disk.

**LV**. What is the status of poetry today? It can't be enjoyed the way Byron was enjoyed in his time. What has changed, in your opinion?

**JC.** I think Byron is a special case — a Cambridge-educated aristocrat who had an affair with his half-sister, and so on — he was first and foremost a celebrity. But how many people read Byron today? How many school or university syllabuses is he on? He hasn't lasted half as well as some of his contemporaries.

There are all sorts of theories posited to explain poetry's fall from grace in recent years (the way it's taught in schools, our culture of instant gratification, the congestion of the entertainment market with TV, films, DVDs, CDs, the Web, and so on), and reading poetry certainly requires more effort than some of these passive, consumerist activities. But I think it's also partly a question of exposure, and of promoting the right poems. When I give good contemporary poems to non-poet friends to read, they always (nearly always!) want to read more.

It does sometimes work to *present* poetry through more commercial channels, though. In 1995, *Il Postino* was a huge, huge box-office hit, and thousands of copies of Neruda's poems were sold off the back of it. Neruda is a serious, complex poet — and a Chilean at that — whom virtually no-one in this country had ever heard of, and yet his books flew off the shelves. The same thing happened with Auden's 'Stop all the clocks…' after *Four Weddings And A Funeral*.

Actually I don't agree that poetry can't be enjoyed as it was in Byron's time. I think you have to believe that your art-form can speak to a broad number of people; otherwise you might as well give up. And while it's true that these days poetry isn't important to most people (only 5% of the poetry books sold in Britain are by living poets), to a few — to those who know where to find the good stuff — it is very important. And I think there's a far bigger potential audience out there. I think it's our responsibility to make sure the good stuff gets seen.

**LV.** Do you need a profession in order to feed your lines or the other way round?

**JC.** Some poets are bank clerks, some lecture in universities, some make their living from playing quiz machines (if he's to be believed!), some don't have a day job at all — and some (like Emily Brontë) only leave the house to stride across the moors. I suppose most poets are freelance these days, and earn a crust from workshops, readings, residencies

and whatever scrag-ends they can pick up. I don't have a day-job at the moment, but from September I'll be working in a university for a while. It can be a fine balance, I think: you have to find what works best for you, what best keeps body and soul together. But there aren't that many poets who use their profession as subject matter, if that's what you mean.

**LV.** Is it a mistake to keep poetry far from the poet's private life?

**JC.** I think the important thing is that a poem should contain some sort of truth, should ring true; and I think perhaps it is hard to do that if you are over-zealous about distancing the work from your private life. As writers, we can only ever say how it is for us (or for the characters we speak through), but the real value of the poem lies in what it means to the reader. To give an example, many of Shakespeare's sonnets are intensely personal: he divulges his carnal desires, his most private thoughts and emotions (or at least he seems to). But the whole debate over who precisely he is addressing is an irrelevance, I think: the point is that we can read the sonnets today and imagine speaking them to our *own* lovers and friends. As readers, we automatically put ourselves in the shoes of the speaker or the spoken-to.

**LV.** Can literary criticism help a poet? Does it help him today? Can a poet survive without help from critics?

**JC.** A brilliant review in the centre pages of *The Sunday Times* can help, of course — mainly because it makes a big difference to sales, and therefore (we hope) to readership — but reviews in small journals aren't really important in terms of reputation. Now and then a new book — or maybe just a single poem — catches the public's imagination without any of that kind of help. I'm thinking of Jenny Joseph's *Warning* — 'When I am an old woman I shall wear purple…' — which was voted the 'Nation's Favourite Poem', where the public get to nominate their favorite poem via a live TV poll (another well-intentioned but misguided initiative, since it neither introduces new poems to the existing audience, nor introduces new audiences to poetry, but enough said…). When a poem takes off like that, I always hope people will go out and buy the whole book, and not just a poster or t-shirt with the poem on, but I think that's wishful thinking on my part. Jenny Joseph has written many other poems — and many of them are much better than *Warning*, I think. I had one of them (*The Sun Has Burst The Sky*) read out at my wedding.

**LV.** The literary critic is being replaced these days by the editor. You need an editor more than you need critical opinions. Books find their way once they have been printed. How do you find your way in this complicated world of publishing houses and editorial contacts?

**JC.** There will always be literary criticism — it's as inevitable as breathing, as T.S. Eliot once said. I don't think the literary critic is being replaced by the editor or that you need one more than the other; I think they have two quite distinct roles and are important at different stages. It's true that the editor enables the poems to be published in the first place, but a critic can influence what happens afterwards — how many books are sold, and therefore how many people get to see what you've written.

I've never found the publishing world particularly complicated. I first met my publisher at a prize-giving evening for a competition I'd entered. I was too nervous to read out my poem so he read it for me. Afterwards, while still at the microphone, he turned to me and said, 'I hope I didn't mess up your beautiful line endings.' Now I know that he says that to all the girls.

**LV.** Since you are both clear and personal (within reason) in your poems, I would like to know your opinion on encoded poetry. This is how the interview began, and this is how it should end: does a poet have any excuse for hiding from the reader's desire to know him as a human being, with a story?

**JC.** I don't think poetry is about telling one's life story. Poets make things up in much the same way as novelists and playwrights and song-writers do. In all these genres it's possible to get the sense of the writer as a human being, but for some reason people tend to think of poetry as more of a cry from the heart, untainted by invention; they think that it should tell a literal truth, stick to the facts. I don't understand this at all. It was T.S. Eliot (again) who said, 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things'. I think that about sums it up.

February 2004

## Peter Dale, *I have always tried to avoid literary and journalistic pigeon-holing of my work*

Interview with **PETER DALE** (born 1938), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: I am reading you with an eye to a possible image of the Desperado poet, by which I mean a number of features, many present in your poetry. I shall start with your obsession with a recording of absence, first your father's, later on of the woman you (still) love, finally, (this is just my intuition) your own. You write about places where you are not, and feelings which you are afraid may be lost, but which actually last longer than your own being, because your poems will spread and prolong them. Your reader is a privileged sharer of secrecy and guilt. You sensibility carries an unseen burden. Is communication of your daily burdens a joy or just a necessity for the poet Peter Dale? You never play when you write, although you try your hand at many rhythms and rhymes. Is poetry a game for you?

**PETER DALE**: Oh, dear, I wish you were not reading me 'with an eye to a possible image of a Desperado poet.' I feel as if I'm going to have hesitations and trouble throughout this interview with that term 'Desperado.' It isn't a term I know, understand or welcome. So far as I know it isn't a current label or pigeon-hole in British poetry. I can get as far as Thoreau's remark that the mass of men live lives of quiet desperation. But I have always tried to avoid literary and journalistic pigeon-holing of my work or myself so I don't think I can accept such a term as a description of my position or my work. You may perhaps persuade me in the course of our discussion but I hope not.

As you suggest there are some absences in the poems, but there are many presences also and I don't think that, as a poet, I am at all rare or desperate in considering absences. It's always been a major theme in British and European poetry – indeed, world poetry. *The Book of the Duchess; Paradise Lost* for example; Wordsworth mourned the absence of the first youthful vision of the world; Coleridge remarked: I *see* not *feel* how beautiful they are, speaking of his loss or absence of feeling for the beauties of nature; *In Memoriam* deals with the loss of Hallam and of religious certainty; then there's 'Dover Beach' and 'Thyrsis'. Not to mention, in general, the elegiac traditions, the nostalgic tradition, the pastoral and classicising tradition: and nearly all love poems are poems of love in some way lost. So I'm nothing special in that respect – nor are all the absences you mention actual absences in my work. My father is there in mirrors, and window reflections. The larger part of everyone's life is an absence: for life exists mainly in memory or some hoped-for future. – When is the present present? That's one of the abiding conundrums of the arts. – I think my poems are best considered, most of them, as forms of attempted dialogue or duologue, not always with a living person; as the

breaking out from the solipsism of this life where the heart of another is a dark forest or attempts to discover – was it Pound who asked? – what do two know in their knowing?

You go on to inquire whether the reader is a privileged sharer of secrecy and guilt in the poems. The answer is I don't know. Poets seldom get to talk to their readers directly. And reviewers, who are paid, and poorly, to read your poems, are not noted for feelings of guilt. You don't in essence write a poem for readers: you write it to find out what the poem is.

In a sense all lyrical poems whoever writes them are eavesdropped, first by the writer and then by the reader. A normal person usually feels a degree of guilt at eavesdropping on other people. Poems attempt to make emotions conscious, to discover what mix they are in, and to transfer the result without loss of impact to the reader.

As for your suggestion that my sensibility carries an unseen burden, all I can say is that it's hardly *unseen*; it is the common burden of humanity:

> ... the burden of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world
> Is lightened...

Poetry is just another, perhaps illusory, attempt at lightening that burden of consciousness for oneself and hopefully for others. The ex-Jesuit poet Peter Levi wrote in his memoir *The Flutes of Autumn*: 'All the consolations are false.'

Or, to put it another way, Yeats, this time:

> Man is in love, and loves what vanishes,
> What more is there to say?

'Vanishes' may well suggest your word 'absences' but my poems attempt to open dialogue with people before and after they vanish.

You suggest that I never play in the poems but many poems are laced with ironies, jokes; puns, sexual and otherwise; in a sense rhyme is a type of game. Stephen Spender, a better critic than poet, once spoke of poetry as a 'truth' game. But poetry is not a simple game, though Eliot called it a mug's game, nor is it an option for a genuine poet. For some of them it has been a game of Russian roulette. It is what poets *have* to do. People say all poets are mad. But they might have been even madder people if they had had no gift for verse.

I've written a book of epigrams, parodies, journalistic squibs, and, recently have started making amusing verses for my grandchildren. (It's a serious thing to accuse an English person of lacking a sense of humour.) But the poet's job

is ultimately to write poems; the verse should end up as printer's flong. And anyone with a modicum of philosophy or science is tempted to consider the entire universe 'the sport of my mad mother Kali'. Some game, that, in which poetry isn't even a house of cards.

**LV**. The Desperado poets push language to the furthest brink of limpidity. Your words are no obstacle to understanding. You seem to make a point of stating in clear terms the most confusing and unutterable depths of nostalgia and regret. Many other poets are conversational, but your veiled rhythm, which is a rhythm of your soul more than of mere syllables, circumscribes you within a circle of pure poetry. When you write you do not talk, but it does happen to you to find yourself making poems in the middle of a chat. Is the poetic image important to your meaning? Are certain words unacceptable to poetry? Where do you draw the line between the poetic and the conversational style? By what devices do you manage to load your (everyday) words with emotion?

**PD**. I imagine you are referring with the word 'limpidity' to what is often called the neutral style in English: writers like Thomas Wyatt, George Gascoigne, Edward Sherbourne, George Herbert, bits of Donne; Henry King; William Wordsworth, Edward Thomas, Larkin generally, the good bits of that curate's egg, Tennyson: 'An infant crying in the night/ And with no language but a cry'. Poets try to articulate that cry and others with 'the imaginable moral power of perfect speech'. (But I'd emphasise 'imaginable moral'.) So, yes, it's true that I veer to that clear end of the spectrum rather than the 'Babylonish dialect' of Milton. Though Milton is limpid enough when he needs to be.

But one limpidly clear line complicates another like contour lines on a map from which a map-reader can imagine the gradient of a hillside or mountain and fix a height from which later he may get a good view. Browning speaks in *Abt Vogler* of composers making out of three sounds not a fourth sound but a star. That is a good image of how poems work with words, too.

But I wouldn't want to over-emphasise the importance of the image. Perception can be jaded by the hebdomadal, the quotidian. A poem has to introduce a degree of surprise or the 'disquotidian' to fire the reader's imagination. It may be my image, rhythm, rhyme, diction, sound-effects, aphorism, wit, idea, wordplay clash of character, and so forth in a variety of mixes. Another way is to make a reader wonder why a bunch of words called a poem is of significance when it is being foregrounded almost only by layout. I don't mean e.e. cummings by that. Frost was one of the experts at this one. Somebody said the poet's job was to make familiar things seem unfamiliar and to make the unfamiliar seem familiar. That's not the job but it may be one of the tools. You may say I choose rather quiet ways to do this. The poet shouldn't draw attention to his stylistic self; the poem should be a lens through which something crucial is seen. 'The poem is not distinguished in its source.' I can't remember who said that but it is true and anon proves it too often for comfort.

I said a good many years back, in a piece on Hardy, that imagism is a young person's poetic when the world is excitingly strange and fresh. There is also a poetry of experience in which, in a shared culture, a mere reference may be more powerful than a new-fangled image.

As for the conversational style, the question has always to be who is the conversationalist whose speech is regarded as the arbiter of what is permissible in conversation and what is not, and in which part of the world in terms of region or ethnic group has that speaker to live or come from? And lastly which particular year shall we pick on as standard for poems? Emily Tennyson's letters are full of 'thees' and '-eths' which sound very literary now but presumably were very intimate then. Conversational styles change rapidly. (Commentators speak of ministers having 'oversight' of something. In my conversation it's the last thing I would want them to have.) A natural style is what I'm after: the right words in the right order. Yvor Winters, whom I don't much agree with, was right to suggest that a poem should not be confined to a conversational level. Emily Dickinson said that the pen has many inflexions, the voice but one. There are ideas and words not used in speech but a writer might well need to use them. And a mixing of registers can, if well done, act to 'disquotidiate', to disorientate expectation or assumption. In moments of high emotion we all say some extraordinary things.

I have a distaste for the 'poetic' in terms of diction, unnatural syntax, word-order, archaic inflexions and self-referring poems. I hate silly games with typography, punctuation and layout in general but don't insist that those can never be appropriate. I have ended one poem with a comma, and used gothic type in another for local purposes.

A criterion of conversational English too often leads to people dismissing the expression of obscurity as obscurity of expression. Given our hasty instant society now, I mean by 'obscurity' here: 'what is not immediately apparent'. In conversation you can ask for repeats and amplification. There isn't time in a poem for such dilutions. In fact, if you tape a conversation, you will find its syntax and redundancies far more complicated than prose or verse.

**LV**. For a Desperado poet there is one major priority: his theme(s) must first be graspable by the chance reader, because the poetry lover can find his own way. A Desperado wants to make converts, and your poetry actually converts many prose-lovers. Your transition from fiction to poetry is very smooth, hardly noticeable. You fictionalize poetry, resorting to incident more than image. The hybridization of literary genres, initiated by Joyce and Eliot, comes naturally to you. You mix poetry with diary, fiction, conversation, even obituary. You see no borders and there is no limit to the sky of your word. How far are you willing to go in order to propitiate the reader? To educate the lover of simplicity in the complications of your meandering feelings? Do you feel it is a shame to compromise with accessibility, a necessity or something that is of no real consequence? Do you ever willfully encode, hide your emotion in a text which needs deciphering?

**PD**. I'm not going to respond as one or talk about 'Desperado' poets, if you don't mind. Sorry.

But who is this so-called chance reader of poems? It must be a tiny minority of the minority that reads modern verse. A poem has readers or it doesn't. I don't think a poem has *necessarily* to be 'graspable by the chance reader'. I like a poem to have, even on first reading, something attractive or interesting to draw the attention of a reader while the whole poem itself gets to work. But this wouldn't be a rule for all poems or poets. Some poems, not to say poets, make very off-putting first impressions. But a poet has to assume some degree of literateness or even literariness in his readers or he would be reduced to rejigging platitudes and conventional wisdom, cracker mottoes. I'm quite unaware that my 'poetry actually converts many prose-lovers', as you suggest. I would hope so, but my publisher certainly hasn't noticed this. But there is no necessary distinction between prose readers and poetry readers.

The hybridization of poetry you speak of long predates Joyce and Eliot. The 'mix' of poetry you refer to is a fairly traditional mix in poetry if you include all its genres from epic, through verse-letter and haiku to light verse. I don't think my approach in this is so very different from scores of poets.

No self-respecting poet can countenance the idea of ' propitiating' the reader – though some so-called performance poets may well propitiate the audience. I may have misunderstood you if you are using the word 'propitiate' in some religious sense.

Frost said he never knew where a poem would end when he began one; Laforgue speaks of a poem having to surprise the poet when finished. (For me one can arrive as a surprise and end as a shock.) A poet has to concentrate on getting the poem right. Readers come after and must fend for themselves. A famous composer whose name at this juncture eludes me was asked if he would explain his piece that he'd just played; he agreed to do so, and immediately sat down and played the piece without comment a second time. Poems equally must speak for themselves. So you see that it is not a question of my going about to 'hide an emotion'. The poem *contains* the emotion, perhaps in both senses. No amount of explanation will make a bad poem better. You can't argue people into responding to a poem as poem. The poem has to convince them. A true poem discovers an emotion in the process of its creation, makes it conscious however complicated the emotion, the situation, may be. Coleridge, speaking of Donne, remarks that 'the wheels take fire from their motion'. A poem is a word for which we have no other word, no synonyms. Poems shouldn't need deciphering, what they need is imaginative response. But the poet may not always be certain even when the poem is finished as to what it is really doing. I remember asking a poet-friend if a line of his might also have an implication I thought I had noticed and he replied, 'It does *now on*'.

I prefaced *One Another* with some tips for readers but I think it was a mistake now to have done so. I have a distaste for all sorts of encryption and encoding in poetry that modernism made modish, and a distaste for several other things that look too much like intellectual self-gratulation. Muldoon, in this respect, I find often a profligate of his considerable talents. My poetry has thus been accused in this country of 'accessibility', by some, as if that were in essence a fault.

**LV**. Desperado novelists have given up the story of the couple, the ‘love interest’ in Virginia Woolf’s words, the happy ending. Desperado poets have also pushed love behind the poem, or rather, love in its romantic, sentimental guise. Your love poems are so discreet that they could pass for dispassionate discourse. You seem to be a passionate person who feels strongly. When it comes to writing, passionate words avoid you, or you avoid them. Consequently, your major theme does not appear to be love, but death. The death of love, actually. Your shyness in front of love statements is typically Desperado. Do you fight it when you write about the one woman your poems outline? When you picture her in the grave, after the grave, even before the grave, is it the grave or your heart that you actually describe? Would you agree to being called a sentimental in disguise?

**PD**. I don’t avoid ‘passionate words’ and don’t think they avoid me but it isn’t such a simple choice. I spoke earlier of contour lines. Sentences in their rhythms and juxtapositions may be more passionate than words as words. To give one example of many, the emotion in ‘A Time to Speak’ isn’t to be found in individual words but in the sentence rhythms, the tension between speech-rhythm and metric, the pauses, the timing and, on this occasion, the images. But the poem won’t seem much to anyone with little experience of life. Genuine poems select the words they need for themselves; poems can ‘arrive’ fully made, even rhymed in sleep, in waking moments at night, on train-journeys or whatever – even when you’re busy with some other writing. When Dante was asked where he got his sweet new style he replied that he took down what love dictated. When the going is good poets take down what feels like dictation; translators sometimes feel almost that the source poet is dictating in the receiver’s language. The problem for poets is always to try to keep their third ear pricked for when the genuine words sound behind all the distractions.

Why do I, or does any poet, have to have this ‘major theme’ as you call it? There are many themes and angles of approach in my work but I don’t put up signposts to them. Dialogue, duologue involves all sorts of topics. You are, I think, mistaken to find only one female in the poems. Why should the imagination be so limited? I can’t recall I ever pictured in a poem any woman in her grave. As Marvel said the grave’s a fine and private place/ But none methinks do there embrace.

It’s interesting that you use the phrase a ‘sentimental in disguise’. ‘Sentimental’ is a tricky word to define usefully. There are a range of sentimentalisms; one art critic has spoken of the painter Francis Bacon as indulging in a sort of sentimentalism of violence. I don’t think I’m anything in disguise nor are the poems; they are out there as poems, not adverts, not novels, not sermons, not word-puzzles. How sentimental is: ‘Only in dreams the living haunt the dead/ In their long night’ ? Simple words, maybe, but they represent a considerable charge of hatred and vitriol. Sometimes the quietest voices are the most powerful; the metaphor is: not in the fire, the thunder or the earthquake but in the still small voice.

**LV**. Most Desperadoes defy theatricality. They resort to a blankness which protects them, a devious indirectness, a complicating veil. Peter Porter, Alan Brownjohn, George Szirtes do the same (to name only a few). This blankness can be ironical, sarcastic, rememorating, wise. Yours is a bruised blankness. *Unaddressed Letter* states: ‘The shock I felt was distant and unreal.’ This is a perfect definition of contemporary (apparent) shy inexpressivity. Have you ever felt you need totally new words in order to express a totally new mood? Is innovation among your goals? Would you agree that your superficial simplicity is just a ruse? That your complication (unwilling, maybe, yet very real) is even worse than Eliot’s, whose dramatic instinct led the reader to the poet’s plan, while you offer no clue? You create a total text, and set the reader free to roam in it. Could you state, for the record, what you expect your readers to find?

**PD**. I don’t understand what you are driving at, or where from, with your phrase ‘defy theatricality’. I would think all artists in words would wish to avoid ‘theatricality’. *Hamlet* is dramatic; the play within that play is necessarily theatrical. The clash between the two is the dramatic point. Nor do I see that the only alternative to ‘theatricality’ is necessarily a blankness of whatever species. The blankness that all conscious beings face is summed up in Wallace Stevens:

> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

I think you are misapplying my line from *Unaddressed Letter*. It refers to the distance between a son just out of his teens and his father. When fathers live this distance closes usually in the natural course of things. It can’t if the father is dead. Remember the twenty-five year old who said: ‘When I was eighteen my father was a complete ignoramus. I was amazed at what he’d learnt by the time I was twenty-one.’

As implied earlier, any new word I might need would be the poem that became it. (It’s true, though, that as a translator I’m sometimes hindered like the rest of that profession by words or nuances unavailable in English and vice-versa.) I’ve occasionally revived an old word or extended a word by analogy but very seldom. In *Eighth Period*, an early poem, I invented the portmanteau word ‘insinuity’ as one joke among several in the dramatic monologue. An early poem takes off from an old word ‘wayzgoose’. As for innovation it is not for the poet or artist to worry about that; he must be true to each poem as it arrives. If the poem demands something traditional or innovative I do it. Beethoven said that what is new and original will make itself felt without our (the artist’s) worrying about it. As I said before: I write the poems; hopefully the reader brings to them a full imaginative response. Hopefully, if the reader’s mind’s eye and the mind’s ear are tuned to rhythm, nuance, register and lived experience, some feeling expressed in the poem will be ‘truable’ to themselves.

I tend to bridle at your suggestion of any poet using ‘a ruse’ as a style. A glass of clear water might look superficially simple when compared to a barrel of oil but it wasn’t a ruse on anyone’s part to make $H_2O$ look like that. Syntactically $e=mc^2$ is simple but takes a bit of explaining. Maybe poems of any sort are like that, a simple syntax indicating experiential depths. So let’s say my poems might have surface tension. It’s only seen in water in some situations but it makes a lens of a drop spilt. I don’t know what a total text might be. I expect readers of a poem to find an emotional nexus of experience that is ‘truable’ for or to themselves.

As for groups, let me refer to Brownjohn’s early piece, ‘English Poetry in the Early Seventies’ (*A Critical Survey*, eds. Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop, Carcanet): ‘Reticence, as a quality, is about at the same time possessing, yet withholding the features of extremity.’ He was referring in this essay to ‘some of the younger English poets loosely brought together as the *Review* group – Ian Hamilton, David Harsent, Hugo Williams, Peter Dale, Colin Falck and others’. Notice that ‘loosely’. That was in my early days but I’ve never been closely associated with any group or clique, though of course I have many poet friends. Keats wrote that the genius of poetry must work out its own salvation in a man. That’s why the people in that list above are remarkable now for the differences in their poetic methods and means and that is how it has always been with most groupings of budding poets and ‘movements’. Nowadays such assemblages have more to do with publicity that with literary endeavour or quality.

**LV**. As I read your volumes of poems, I have noticed echoes from Eliot, Donne, Yeats. You seem extremely familiar with *The Waste Land*. As T.S. Eliot is *the* stream of consciousness poet, and as you come right after him, as part of what I call the Desperado age, what is your relationship with him and Yeats (a crossroads poet preceding Eliot’s innovation)? Most Desperadoes worship Eliot, echo him instinctively, admit he is huge, but deny any intellectual kinship, as no Desperado admits having idols. On the other hand, no one could be farther away from Eliot’s noisy suffering than you, the discreet bard. What poets do you value, who are your literary friends, where do you place yourself, if you were to think of a group?

**PD**. Yes, there are many localised allusions and near citations or parodies of other poets in some periods of my work. And more than you mention: Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Hopkins and so forth. It was partly a trick of the times when I began. Somebody accused Brahms, symphony number three, was it, of coming close to repeating a Beethoven motif and he replied, ‘Any fool can see that.’ But, as in music so in literature, with a bit of luck, echoes and reminiscences may add depth and colour to new works. But they are not essential or obligatory, though you might think so from some modernists. In *The Fragments* there are deliberate *Waste Land* references. Those share the area of the poem with the figure 6,000,000 as a comment on the Holocaust. The figure was also used in an advert for Guinness which struck me as a chilling irony but the poem deals with the whole idea of the tradition of Christianity in the modern world; my father was a teetotal fundamentalist Christian living in a tabernacle voided of the contemporary world; Eliot,

an avowed Christian, also had a streak of anti-Semitism as had the whole Christian tradition until fairly recently. But such references are in the common job-lot of information.

I value all sorts of poets; but all sorts of poems would be more to the point. Hopkins said somewhere that the effect of a masterpiece was to make him admire and do otherwise. Otherwise is a good influence, perhaps my favorite. Otherwise one would repeat others or yourself. Poets who are awake can be influenced in some ways, conscious or not, by everything they read.

**LV**. A Desperado is more often than not autobiographical. Some novelists, such as Graham Swift, claim that imagination comes first. As a poet, you do not have to invent everything. Mere hiding of obvious narration and avoiding too direct revelation of privacy will do. You are talking about yourself, it would seem. Your honesty is disarming. Your truthfulness is captivating. Yet, at the end of all your volumes so far, all we get to know is a literary persona. Your poetry does not give your life away. Since this not poetry but an interview, I would like to know a few facts, all the same. How old are you? Why this animosity in the relationship with your father? Who is the woman you love and lost? Who is the child you fathered, described tenderly and then never mentioned again? What did you study? What is your profession? In short, I think I am asking for a brief summary of your non-poetic life.

**PD**. Can one handle these words ‘honesty’ and ‘truthfulness’ as critical terms? Graham Swift is right; imagination comes first. The old classical idea was that the truest poetry was the most feigning. How can anyone tell from words printed on the page whether the person who wrote them is lying? Good liars and conmen are believed. Poems have to be ‘truable’ in the reader’s imagination and experience. Do we really know the truth or honesty rating of Dante, Villon, Shakespeare? Do you claim to know any of these as more than a literary persona? Even their biographies in so far as they still exist are written. Some critics have even doubted the biographical content of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, claiming they form a triangular plot of his typically dramatic imagination.

Poems have no obligation to be autobiographical but I think poems must spring out of a life; they shouldn’t generalise life-experience but rather universalise it.

So there is biography in my work, too much, in some of it. But in the mature work I think the poems have as much biography in them as they need. Other details are available on all the blurbs and flapdoodles and in reference books – for the curious. (You seem to have overlooked many poems about pregnancy and children, several that deal with teaching experience, many about marriage and love, friends and acquaintance.)

But to deal with your particular points. I’m sixty two. The opposition between father and son is an old theme in literature and mine was caused in confronting the absurdity of his fundamentalist religion. I haven’t loved and lost any women recently. I’ve been married for thirty five years. We have two children, a girl and a boy, and two grandchildren. I’ve written about both of our children more than a few times and my daughter’s children receive regular nonsense

poems. There are also several poems about walking, several mention cycling. I studied English at Oxford, taught it and then became a freelance writer. While teaching, I translated into verse-equivalents: Villon; Corbière; Laforgue; Dante. I'm currently working on a new book of poems and sundry translations.

**LV**. The Desperado is often a displaced person (concretely or just in an intellectual area), who builds a dystopia as his only refuge. The description fits you. You run away from your life. You live in the ante-chamber of death (death of a loved person, father, woman, friend), and build it into a dystopic land, a kind of after life on the page. Your poetry exorcises the fear of death. You inhabit all ends. You kill the fear of the end. Frail as your sensibility may look, your lines attempt a feat of bravery. They rescue life from mortality for the brief space of a poem. Would you say you are a serene poet? Do you have torturing, haunting fears? Is poetry a liberation from them, a recreation of lost peace, or an image of life dislocated into the dystopic land of after-death?

**PD**. Well, all of us live in the 'antechamber of death'. But how on earth can you say I run away from life: look how much I have crammed into it: over two years working in hospitals – between college terms and before; thirty years full-time teaching running a big department while translating all those mentioned above; at the same time I was co-editing *Agenda* magazine, bringing up a family, writing all the books of verse – doing walking tours, cycling tours. Now I'm writing poems, translating, reading and lecturing, writing verse for my grandchildren and interviewing for and helping to run *Between the Lines* publications. If that is running away from life how do you run towards it?

But I like your phrase that poems, not just mine, rescue life from mortality for the brief space of a poem. It is close to a remark of Larkin's. But when you read a living poem by a dead poet it also does the reverse: it brings home to us that this poor bugger who felt this so powerfully is dead. I touch on this in *Summer Shadows*. Auden said that the arts are our only means of communication with the dead and without such communication a truly human life is not possible.

As for displaced person, here's a verse I wrote to amuse my wife:

Asked for requests for Christmas, birthday gifts,
I put my closest friends to awful shifts.
They cannot wrap it, pack it, box it, can it,
Since what I always want's another planet.

But perhaps Julio Cortazar put it more seriously: 'The only true exile is the writer who lives in his country.' Not just writers. Christ said almost the same of prophets. But this is being over-dramatic: a person is not so much displaced as sent into internal exile in their own heads.

**LV**. Desperado poetry breathes the air of dystopia because it defamiliarizes whatever should be familiar, maximizes fears and then stifles them, ruins all expectations of peace, baffles and rejects emotion of all kinds, more or less attempting a dry approach. You are an exception to the last feature, you are not at all dry. You are, however, extremely fond of secrecy. Would you be willing to explain why you hide your life so well that the reader cannot even guess what you do for a living? With William Carlos Williams, we knew he was a doctor. With Eliot, banking was not hard to guess, or philosophy, for that matter. With Desperadoes, the inner life is all that matters. They use the incident, the story – the outer life – as self-detonation. They tell the story of an absent hero. Are you present as a human person, a concrete life in your poems? Or would you rather have the reader converse with a spokesman, a persona, all feelings and not even one moment of reliable truth?

**PD**. Secrecy is not the word; reticence is. Why should any reader want to know what I do/did for a living? If I am any good I shall be dead when most of my readers reach the poems and jobs and so forth will be irrelevant. Why do you assume that emotions aren't reliable truth? Shelley said that in our intelligence we are the same but in our imaginations we are all different individuals. It may be that in our emotions too we are the same unless certified. In which case we come back to my necessary invented word 'truable'. Everyone presents personas of different sorts to different acquaintance all through life; why shouldn't one be content with the ones that a poet presents? The true self can't be presented in life perhaps because it can't be fully known to the presenter. Graves who opened a poem superbly with 'She always speaks in her own voice/ Even to strangers...' presented the poem to two separate women, I seem to remember. Personas in life may try to speak the truth as they know it when occasion demands; but poems speak the truth of the self. Why should they be attached to a bunch of personas? They are often a sort of *esprit de l'escalier* also: they are either what should have been said in an ideal world or what one would say in a hell of a world.

**LV**. The poem *Steps* contains a perfect definition of your favorite environment in poetry, 'the bottom step of light.' You share this space with a girlish figure,
green-eyed, Irish, childishly tender, good gardener (with green fingers, you say), gentle vicinity and a shy person on the whole. You address her as 'after-image, my after-love.' *Eidetic Image* adds, ' I expect you everywhere.' This love is lost, the woman died. Yet death is not your theme, but death defeated. Your poetry is not a forceful one, but the feeling insidiously pervades the reader's soul. Your frailty is more convincing than a firm statement. Is creation joy to you? Is poetry a necessary survival, a longing for what is lost, a drug or mere remembrance of things past?

**PD**. Steps, stairs, are not my favorite environment, even in poems. The woman in *Eidetic Image* did not die and wasn't Irish; the whole sequence, *The Going*, is about a relationship that broke up. So she might still be encountered anywhere in town; when an advert appears that looks like her the imagination of loss can be reawakened anywhere. So *Eidetic*

*Image* is about an advertising hoarding reminiscent of a loved face. Imagination and adverts occur everywhere. Eidetic and after-image are technical terms in studies of modes of visual perception. Macbeth's dagger may be an eidetic image; he tries anyway to grab it. Some people have that kind of externalising imagination. It may account for some ghost stories.

There are quite a few scientific concepts lying about my poems from nuclear physics references to quantum and cosmological. Often, oddly, in the voice of a woman.

Well, perhaps my poems may not appear forceful but I remind you of the awful joke about a Japanese sentry who said to his Gurkha attacker: 'Hah, missed me!' To which the Gurkha replied: 'Try turning your head.'

**LV**. *Vigil* is one of your most appealing poems: 'Now you are gone/ your small perfections inveigle me:/ curve of your eyelid closed in sleep/ widens to my horizon.// Sleepless/ I used to watch those pupils move,/ shifting deltas of blue veins,/ blindly scanning my face.// Some nights I came near/ my lips in touch/ with your pulsing lids/ to catch the drift of your dreams.' The poem is remarkable as a blend of very concrete love imagery and very ethereal presence of loss, of the ever after. It is a paradox, and all your poems follow this pattern, this alternance here-there, direct-indirect, statement-understatement. Are you a dual nature or is this your poetic strategy?

**PD**. I think you may have misread *Vigil* somewhat. It concerns the attempted escape from solipsism through love; the speaker wants to know the sleeper's dream *as* she dreams it. To share all, the reality, not the report. The regret comes not from absence but from the impossibility of this kind of synchronicity.

**LV**. In *Old Poet on a Rainy Day*, you call poetry 'the lonely art.' You *are* a poet on a rainy day, looking out of the window, seeing your inner life out in the street. What does it feel like to know your readers share your experience like a museum? What is your relationship to these readers? Do you want them to know you or to dream you, according to the rules you make up?

**PD**. I can't answer this very well. Poets want their poems to be read and felt. Charles Simic has said: 'In a good poem the poet who wrote the poem vanishes so that the poet-reader may come into existence.' The first poet-reader is the poet on completion of the poem. His job then is to pass it on.

Writing *is* one of the loneliest of the creative arts. Many writers require absolute silence, absolute solitude in which to compose. Even painters have models and composers need musicians and meet hundreds. But writing is even lonelier because only the most 'famous' and 'fashionable' writers really meet any of their readers and then usually in social and distanced situations. Only twice in my life have I seen someone who is unknown to me reading a book of mine.

**LV**. In the foreword to *One Another*, you felt the need to acknowledge the presence of fiction. You talk about a 'story', which, you also state, is in the end 'the morphology of an emotion.' Can your poetry exist without incidents? Could you go back to what lyricism was before Eliot devised hybridization, the mixture of poetry, fiction, drama?

**PD**. Eliot didn't invent this hybridization; it's been around for ages. But I don't think I understand your question. What do you mean by 'incidents'? There's nothing odd or modern about poems that need incidents. Look at Wyatt's:

> Thanked be fortune, it hath been otherwise
> Twenty times better; but once in special,
> In thin array after a pleasant guise,
> When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
> And she me caught in her arms long and small;
> And softly said: dear heart how like you this?

A woman coming to your room like that must be an incident, surely. So too must it have been when Keats thrust out his hand in that fragment:

> This moving hand now warm and capable.

There are thousands of previous and other examples.

**LV**. If Wordsworth thought of poetry as emotion recollected in tranquility, you see it as **tenderness recollected in grief**. Not only that, but also repeated, as your volume says, *Da Capo*, which is also an urge to the perfectly Desperado gesture of rereading. What is your advice to the Desperado reader? How would you like to be read? What is the profile of the ideal critic, for you? Is your poetry communication with your readers and critics, or recreation/ recollection of tenderness, or, probably, both?

**PD**. I don't think I understand your remarks about Desperadoes and rereading. One thing that makes literature is that it invites reading after reading and further re-readings. I haven't much notion of what an ideal critic would be. It seems to me that an ideal Coleridge critic might not be, say, and ideal Housman critic, or an ideal Pound critic an ideal Jeffers critic. I suppose a Dale critic ought to get himself a life, have some idea of sentence sounds and verse rhythms, a knowledge of rhyme techniques and an armoured vest against manic depression. But I'd rather have ideal readers; what

they need to be I hardly know. I just try to write poems; it’s what I do. But a finished poem may have many uses in society that don’t require the assent or acquiescence of the originator or the critics. When he asked, I lent my local chemist books of my verse because he wanted some poems to interest a woman friend. When poems get out into that kind of use you may think that something has been achieved. Remember Sir Philip Sidney’s almost benign curse:

‘But if... you cannot bear the planet-like music of poetry; if you have so earth-creeping a mind that it cannot lift itself up to look to the sky of poetry... thus much curse I must send you in the behalf of all poets: that while you live, you live in love, and never get favour, for lacking skill of a sonnet; and when you die, your memory dies from the earth for want of an epitaph.’

That extract clearly implies a poetry that is intimately integrated into the life of the people whose culture produces it. This is the ideal and it’s one we are a long way from these days. It’s always pleasing when an ordinary member of the public writes to say they were impressed by, or found interest or use, in one of your poems. One person I wrote to on a poem-card ordered fifty more copies from the publisher. That is how poems ought to live. We are a long way now from the kind of society in which a poem like *In Memoriam* can have an almost immediate wide impact and general social effect. I think it’s maybe an energising idea in some poets’ imagination. But it isn’t for that forlorn hope that anyone writes poems. They are trying to write poems as poems and the measure they have in their heads is a rule calibrated by the great poems of the past.

2001

## Michael Donaghy, *I don't recognize myself as part of any group*

Interview with **MICHAEL DONAGHY** (24 May 1954 – 16 September 2004), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** You were born in New York and are now working in London as a teacher and a musician. Your poems sound very much like jazz. What kind of music do you play? Is there any connection between your music and your poetry?

**MICHAEL DONAGHY:** I don't play jazz. I play Irish traditional music. But I've only alluded to Irish music and Irishness in a handful of poems in order to approach issues of orality, sentimentality, nationality and memory. I've used other musics: Mozart, Purcell, Curtis Mayfield and John Cage crop up, 'Footage from the Interior' draws on African log drumming, 'Down' on the Blues, in 'Theodora Theodora' I use Rembetika, in 'The Palm' it's Jazz, and in 'Ramon Fernandez' I allude to partisan songs of the Spanish Civil War. But I knew that once I broached the matter of Irishness or Irish folk music I'd be typecast as 'the Irish American musician poet' – so I delayed publishing those poems until after my first collection.

I've often been asked to expand on the relationship between traditional music and my writing. There isn't one, really. My parents played the odd tune, I just happen to play the flute a bit myself, and I've written a couple of poems exploring Irish traditions. But if pressed I'll concede there's a common root in orality. The music I play survives in an oral/aural tradition, whether or not it may also be packaged as a product nowadays, its essential nature resides in the free exchange of tunes among non-professional musicians who learned from their families and communities, and who play for the love of playing, for each other, and for dancers. Most of the musicians I know don't read music and they've picked up their vast repertoires of jigs and reels – hundreds of tunes and variations – by ear. And this is the original situation of verse. The mnemonic groove established by a traditional musical form like a reel or a blues is analogous to the traditional oral mnemonics of poetry.

**LV**. I detect a few Yeatsian echoes in your early poems. Is Yeats important to your becoming a poet?

**MD.** Very important. I still find it hard to resist slipping into that style. I admire his authority and passion.

**LV**. Death is an obsession with you in a metaphysical manner (other critics have noticed that before me). Your images

of death, again, have a lot in common with jazz, and many of your poems are real blues. Was that your intention or am I misreading you?

**MD.** I still don't see the jazz connection. I have one poem about a jazz musician and one poem about a blues musician. As for my 'obsession' with death, I don't think I'm any more morbid than most poets.

**LV**. The universe of your poetry is more American than British. Unlike Eliot, who Anglicized his verse, you Americanize London, I think. What brought you to London and why did you leave New York?

**MD.** I'm not sure that my universe is more American than British. I moved to Britain to be with my partner, Maddy Paxman, an extraordinary Englishwoman I met in Chicago. We lived there together for a time and when her visa expired I followed her home to London. Twenty years on, we're still together, and now we have a son, Ruairi.

**LV**. Do you think of yourself as American or British these days? A musician or a poet?

**MD.** I think of myself as an Irish American long-time resident of London. I think of myself much more as a poet nowadays than a musician.

**LV**. Death and love go together in your poems, as they did for John Donne. You avoid autobiography, though. One of the features of Desperado poetry – my coinage – is its lawlessness. Nobody's rules are acceptable. The Desperado poet has a life to express and does so by making his own genre. You do that, I think. Would you accept being called a Desperado poet?

**MD.** No. I reject all 'schools' and 'movements'. If, by your definition, that makes me a 'Desperado', it's a bit like the Cretan liar paradox. Of course, you're welcome to call me anything you like, but I don't recognize myself as part of any group. By the way, my poems are most often characterized as following traditional 'rules'.

**LV**. Your poems have heroes who are full of life. Your lines teem with incidents, memories, grief and joy. There is a love of life in what you write that not many Desperadoes have. Could you reveal some facts of the real life that supports these lines? What is your family background? What are your parents, what has your education been, your profession, your present family life?

**MD.** I was born in the South Bronx, New York, in 1954. My parents had emigrated from Ireland after the war and both took jobs at the Statler Hilton hotel in Manhattan – my mother, a Kerrywoman, working as a maid and my father, from Belfast, in the boiler room. They married, had two children, and then we moved back to Ireland for a bit because my father had an offer of work back in Belfast. They always regarded themselves as Irish-in-exile so this was to be their triumphant return home. But the offer fell through, so we returned, broke, to the Bronx. My most enduring memories of my childhood are related to the violence of that environment – horrific street violence, and that I suppose, together with a delirious histrionic experience of Catholicism, tends to crop up in my work in one guise or another. I could say it was a 'hard life', and perhaps I should, but after relating these details in several interviews my story is beginning to sound like an application for marginality status, the cliché sob story of the working class writer. In fact, I grew up in one of the wealthiest cities in the world, and our hardship differed substantially from that of our non-white neighbors in that we could realistically hope to escape our situation. And, of course, I did. I was educated at Fordham University in the Bronx and at the University of Chicago.

**LV**. Who are your literary friends? A Desperado has another feature that is particularly his: he is desperately similar to others in a haunting desire for dissimilarity. Each poet today is his own trend. Are there any poets you feel akin to? Whom do you value, whom do you blame (for the present decline of poetry, maybe)?

**MD.** Is poetry in decline? I suppose few people buy collections of literary poetry, but rap is ubiquitous and rap musicians sell millions of records. It may not be to our liking, but it would be absurd to claim this isn't poetry. As for my friends, I feel an affinity with poets who engage with form but are also imaginatively daring.

**LV**. These days poets read poets, but the mass of readers has decreased drastically. I feel this from my own students' reaction (all studying English literature). Reading is superseded by the screen at certain levels of society. Is poetry to blame in any way? Will the computer devour the book in the (hopefully very distant) future?

**MD.** I believe we're returning to an aural/oral culture. Electronic media is part of this, of course, but the culture of live poetry performance exists separate from, and parallel to, literary poetry culture. Nowadays I perform four of five times a month and in those performances I recite my work entirely from memory. I started this practice a few years ago when I turned up for a reading having left my books on the train – at which point I realised to my mild horror that I'd inadvertently memorized my poems – I suppose this is because I'd taken such a long time composing them. I recall being inordinately worried how this would appear to the audience. Would I come across as conceited, theatrical, unliterary? Back then I had a puritanical prejudice against recitation. Reading from a text, preferably from behind a

lectern, seemed more scholarly, more serious, more dignified. I felt there was something intrinsically narcissistic and hammy about performance. But when I began to speak I realized I was completing the action that began with my decision to write in a memorizable form. The words fell into place – catch that spatial analogy – and I realized there was another level to this art.

When I say 'puritanical prejudice', by the way, I'm being fastidious. The reformation and the rise of print led directly to the denigration of older oral, performative methods of communication, to the suppression of theatre, and the campaign against 'enthusiasm' in preaching, against gesture and spoken rhetoric. It remains a deep seated bias of the bookish or literary personality. I went on tour last year with the Queen of Dub poetry, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, and I was struck by her unabashed use of movement and song. She reminded me of Pindar's description of Greek poetry performance as sacred debt: 'to blend together properly the lyre with her intricate voice, and the shout of oboes, and the placing of words.' By contrast, I'm fairly monochrome in my performance, but I now acknowledge that the art I practise is *mousiké*, 'the art of the Muses' a term which referred equally to music, words and dance. Of course, a bad performance poet is the worst kind of nuisance, and a great performer can make the worst doggerel sound profound to a aurally naive audience. Nevertheless, I'm honoured to accept the designation.

**LV**. Did coming to London change your themes or your way of writing? I notice a larger dose of clarity in your later lines. Is clarity necessary to poetry, or should comprehensibility be sacrificed for the sake of ambiguity?

**MD.** I just write the poems I feel I must write. I never consider what poetry 'should' be.

**LV**. If I am not mistaken, John Mole is a musician, too. You resemble him in several ways. Jazz may be a common passion and his themes weave the same music as yours. He is extremely clear, though, while you are only sporadically so. You prefer 'lectures upon the shadow' while he writes in sunlight. Do you know him? Do you think you have anything in common with him?

**MD.** I've met John only once and found him agreeable, but I'm not familiar with his work.

**LV**. Is an interview a good way of reaching the meaning of a poet?

**MD.** I'm ambivalent about interviews for three reasons. First, I'm not the definitive authority on my work. In fact, I'm not at all sure I write my books. I feel it's more the case that my books get written through me. Second, I like to think my work is still developing and I suspect that any attempt to 'explain' myself interferes with or limits that development. Third, I'd like to be remembered for my poems, not my charming personality. I say this not because I'm

an especially reticent or private individual – but because my work has a life of its own and, if it works, it's as much 'about' the reader's life as about mine.

**LV**. Can you think of a question that you would have liked to be asked yet never have been, so far?

**MD.** No.

**LV**. Poetry has changed its coat lately. The idea of harmony has changed, both in music and in poetry. The same as in life, it has become more unlike music than ever. Which means that it needs to be renewed. New rhythms, new rhymes, new images. There is more novelty now than in all the centuries that came before put together. Novelty, dissimilarity, is the slogan of the third millennium at this point. Do you feel this is true, or is it just a false perception?

**MD.** Yes, that's an excellent point. It has to do with consumerism and the extraordinary profusion of information. Artists are taking desperate measures to reach a public numbed by overstimulation. I reject this trend.
**LV**. If you were to start all over again, would you still come to London, be a poet, teach music? Would you do anything differently?

**MD.** Yes, I would still come to London. But I would spend more time among traditional musicians.

**LV**. Since being a Desperado implies rejecting any grouping, I do not expect you to accept being ranged in a trend. I will not try to do that. I only wonder: Do you think all these dissimilar poets today can be seen as a large family whose major feature is singularity? Would Desperado be a good description of the new type of writer, in your opinion?

**MD.** I'm not sure. The word conjures up images of Clint Eastwood and Mexican bandits. All very macho and Hollywood. Maybe it fits these poets for precisely that reason – but I don't think it fits me.

November 2002

## **Maura Dooley, *I look for the poem that will haunt me for a while…***

Interview with **MAURA DOOLEY** (born 1957), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** Your poems so far are a desperately intimate and sacred book. You are so secretive that you refuse revealing the incidents, and muffle the emotion. You almost refuse the poem. That seems to be the key to your magic: uttering so little, you suggest immensity. What would you say your themes are? I detect love and absence. What more?

**MAURA DOOLEY:** Themes... Past and future: the way they converge in what we know as the present... The silences between people and what may or may not be being said or imagined in those silences... Friendship... Love in a difficult world... the spirit and where it might be found... Politics... Fear.

**LV.** Your images are crystal clear yet shy to pinpoint an experience. The ‘streets are paved with flesh’ in London. Hope is ‘that old antiseptic’. There is a burden of pain in all your lines. Whether love for a father who seems to have been lost, or a man who seems to have been lost as well, both have scars in your soul to boast of. What do words need in order to qualify for images in your poems? How do these images come to you?

**MD.** Images come to me visually and then I have to find words for a complex mood or emotion. Or they come to me sometimes in words, as a means of picturing the essence of a feeling or mood I am trying to capture. Robert Frost said, ‘a poem begins as a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a lovesickness’. Isn’t that just right?

**LV**. Postmodern poets rely heavily on incident in their lyrical texts. I for one try to avoid the term post- or post-postmodern, and my alternative suggestion is Desperado. One of the features that make up the wanted profile of this kind of poet is the fact that you read his volumes in search of some biographical narrative. A volume is the story of one period in the poet’s life, like a belated diary, spiced with afterthoughts. I can feel the story in your two volumes, but there is no way I could say ‘I know what has happened, this is what she has gone through’. You watch your experiences jealously. Could you wrap a story round the two heroes of your two volumes?

**MD**. I think if I wanted to do that I would have written a novel. The collections are full of separate poems. Certainly there are links and recurring themes but the collections are just that, collections, a gathering up of poems written over a number of years but not specifically addressing a theme or character. Perhaps too, we as readers should be careful not to suppose that the ‘I’ in a poem is always simply the writer of the poem. Like many other poets, the ‘I’ that I use in my poems is sometimes an imagined or borrowed ‘I’ and not simply me.

**LV**. In *Mind the Gap* I find a faint Eliotian echo of London, spiced with the rats in the Underground and the mechanical announcement, ‘Mind the Gap’. It is hard to detect definite influences in your verse. Whom would you say you feel akin to, in poetry?

**MD**. Influences... Growing up I read Philip Larkin, William Blake, WB Yeats, and Seamus Heaney most of all. Then the Metaphysicals, Miroslav Holub, Wallace Stevens, the New York School and Rimbaud. At school we read T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence. All men, you’ll notice. It’s different now. We just did not have so many women in print then. But I’d say that music and song lyrics were at least as strong an influence at that time: Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Elvis Costello, Joni Mitchell... then the end of a strong moment in the British Folk scene, Reggae and the beginnings of Punk.

I read Sylvia Plath when I was very young but didn’t understand her till later. Then I read Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, early Derek Walcott, Michael Longley, Fleur Adcock, Gillian Clarke, Anne Sexton and at this time discovering some great work through translation: Marina Tsvetayeva, Czeslaw Milosz, Nina Cassian. In the late 80s I was stunned by C.K. Williams and Sharon Olds: lots of the Americans. At the same time, in this country, the emergence of what was called ‘Performance Poetry’, which often involved music and was far more culturally diverse than the mainstream in British poetry at that time, began to have a profound effect on the presentation of poetry to audiences. Now, it would be too difficult for me to begin to name my own contemporaries, there are too many of them to list. Isn’t that a joy? So many interesting poets to choose from.

**LV**. Your poem goes ‘home lonely at night’, but your reader does not. You share with this reader the need for sharing. What makes you so secretive and careful with the stories in your life?

**MD**. I don’t think that I am particularly secretive. I hope to write something which satisfies the reader but it’s true that I do like mystery.

**LV**. Speech is a denied gift with you: ‘Each time we meet there is more to say,/ fewer ways of saying it.’ Language is a mirror in which you see yourself and the very reflection makes you freeze, fall silent and articulate each word with

difficulty. Do you write easily? Are your poems an easy result of inspiration or a concentrated effort of digging, bringing up the tip of the iceberg and burying the rest in understatement?

**MD**. I don't think speech is so much 'denied' as withheld in my poems. The same is true for so many of us surely? Life is full of compromise, 'the road not taken'... that interests me and it is a big subject. My poems rarely come quickly. I can think only of two such gifts in my whole life. An idea, an image, a phrase begins to turn around in my head and slowly it grows. Then I dig.

**LV**. Everyday, common, flat sentences like 'And I'll get back to you as soon as I can', which you hear on an answering machine, are loaded with magic. One such sentence is followed by, 'My calls to you, like a shoal/ of little wishes...' Disappointed love screams in whispers. The music of your soul can only be heard with earphones. Were you aware when you wrote in this way that it was the most efficient way of dragging readers into your private world? Of impressing them without letting them know what attracted them in the first place?

**MD**. Certainly I was aware of the magical within the commonplace. I like looking at the overfamiliar and making it new again, making it strange. Isn't that always one of poetry's greatest strengths?

**LV**. 'There is a train to anywhere', says one poem. The question follows, 'Why are you never on my train ...?' Your lines are steeped in a gentle solitude, a burden that breaks your back but is described angelically, in mild images and half-uttered wishes. How would you describe yourself, a poet of passion or of restraint (in Eliot's words, 'the heart would have responded beating obedient...')?

**MD**. I'd like to be a poet of 'passion' AND 'restraint'. Life seems, to me at least, to be about the balance between those.

**LV**. Rarely, some poems mention age: 'In the year/ I grew old...' Is growing up (rather than old) an obsession with you? The past is. Time is not often mentioned. Your poems are not obvious lyrical clocks. They may be time bombs, with hidden machineries meant to blow up your surface composure at a certain, pre-established moment. What inner discipline makes you so discreet when you write about loss?

**MD**. I think loss or grief is particular rather than general. It would be boring of me to write about my own personal sorrows ( or joys) but dull too, perhaps, to write in a broad way about such huge subjects. I try to move within the poem from what may be particular and personal to what I feel may be a shared, often unspoken, perception or experience.

**LV**. *What Every Woman Should Carry* advises: 'Anguish, at what I said/ I didn't say/ when once you needed/didn't need me. (...)/ His face the last time,/ my impatience, my useless youth./ That empty sack, my heart.' This is a revelation of your unconfessed tragedy. How would you describe this painful experience which spurs you into hunting peace of mind within the brief space of a poem?

**MD**. This poem is also wry and knowing I hope. It invites the reader to move from my trivial collection of odds and ends (which are, of course, also symbols, or signifiers, if you like) to their own and on out into the larger question of all that we carry with us, in our hearts, minds and souls.

**LV**. *Pathetic Magic* is a statement of loneliness forever:

At the door
the love we want to offer
gathers itself.

*Safe Home, Take Care,*
*Good Luck, God Bless,*
a rabbit's foot.

Nothing saves us
from the boat tossed over,
a leaf in storm,

like my heart
turning now,
as darkness takes you,

and somewhere
a door slams,
long, long into the night.

Your poems are not long and they do not claim the sound of rhyme. You are discreet in your writing as you are in communicating your experience. Do you have a lyrical ideal, one kind of poetry that you would like to write, or do you discover your form as you go along?

**MD**. In fact I do use rhyme occasionally and, no, I don't have a lyrical ideal. For most poets , perhaps, once they have found their voice the real challenge is to keep on moving and not just to write the same kind of poem, in that same voice, over and over.

**LV**. I think of you as a Desperado poet insofar as you reject all previous conventions and strive to build your own. Am I wrong to attribute this ambition to your poetry? How would you describe your poetic credo?

**MD**. I don't reject all previous conventions but I do want to try to say something my way. I write as a way of working out how I feel about things: a way of looking at and trying to understand life. Sometimes then, I write what some term 'a political poem' but I never do so directly. I use allegory or a personal perspective. I hope it is lyrical.

**LV**. Do you like telling stories in verse? Do you plan on revealing the incidents from now on, or is there a deliberate strategy in your hidden stories, whose visible halo the poem is?

**MD**. I very much enjoy telling stories through the verse but I do feel that there is a contemporary concern with the 'confessional' or the autobiographical which borders on prurience. I am not deliberately secretive. The poems reveal what is necessary for the poem to work. I hope that the rhythm and the language are persuasive. If a reader found particular images lyrically beautiful then I should feel delighted. These poems offer glimpses of my experience and my perception, my imagination and my moods.
They are not my autobiography.

**LV**. For our readers to know you better, could you tell us more about your activity as a poet among poets? Your social role in British poetry?

**MD.** I've always worked in the fields of Literature and Education, encouraging

new writing. I set up writing workshops for the Arvon Foundation, a National organisation, outside the conventional educational centres, that holds courses for those interested in writing: any age, any background. Currently I teach an MA in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths College, part of the University of London and previously I founded and directed for six years the Literature series at the South Bank Centre: a programme of 150 talks and readings annually, by writers, for small and large audiences. In that role I also revived an old and important biennial festival: Poetry International. I read, listened to and worked with poets from all over the world. I learnt a great deal. I have also worked in film, for the Jim Henson Organisation and theatre, for Performing Arts Labs. All of this has fed my own work, I'm certain.

**LV**. What do you think of those contemporary poets who play upon rhymes and neglect emotion? As a reader of poetry, do you look for the experience of life or the experience of the word?

**MD**. I enjoy rhyme even though I do not use it very much myself. We have had a return to 'form' and there is some good work around. As a reader I don't care if a poem rhymes or not. I look for a poem that offers a fresh perception in memorable language, where not a word is wasted. I look for a poem that will haunt me for a while: a poem that I'll have to come back to again and again.

June 14, 2002

## Nick Drake, *We live in an age of entertainment, and so a minor age for poetry*

Interview with **NICK DRAKE** (born 1961), British poet and film-maker

**LIDIA VIANU:** I have a lot of personal and literary questions, which are closely connected, since your poems feed on your experience with ostentation. First, who is this grandmother who left Prague? You have written a lot about her and her poems are among the most impressive. Do you have Czech ancestors? Do they mean much to you?

**NICK DRAKE:** My grandmother was Anna Vondracek, the most basic biographical details are in the back of the book. She was my father's mother, born in Prague, married an official at the British Embassy there, came to London with him and their two sons in late 1938 when the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia. She became a seamstress at a London hospital. She lived the rest of her life in a tower-block flat, which I describe in several of the poems. As she grew older she became increasingly disorientated and confused, often forgetting to speak English, often thinking she was back home in Prague. She was a difficult, complex and compelling person, a central figure in my life. I was obsessed with understanding why she had become this strange person, and with the history of her and my father's exile – and indeed with the dilemma of exile in general (hence the Mr Blatny poems, the gypsies in Spain, etc). I was very interested in the imaginative dilemma of a character caught between two worlds, in many ways opposites of each other historically. So I visited Prague both before and after the Velvet Revolution, learned Czech to a basic level at an evening class, made old and young Czech friends. I understood both my grandmother and my father far better for having visited Prague, a city which, in any case, is rich with the kind of imaginative complexities and ambivalences which I felt were driving my poetry. It was my Byzantium!

I also found my voice as a poet by writing about people. And, although I am not comparing myself, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* was a big influence; portraits rich in historical allusion and the complexities of memory, a sense of time shaping each mortal short story.

**LV.** You write about the death of several people you know and about the death of Romanian leader Ceausescu, too. Absence is a major topic with you. Do you consider yourself a sad or strong poet (maybe both)?

**ND.** I consider myself a person who writes as I can at the time about the things that obsess my imagination, using the materials of the times at hand. I do think this book is a largely a sad book, it is a book of history, of memory, of the recording and expression of the minor-key emotions associated with loss and absence. It records the lives of a number of the dead. I hope my new book will develop beyond that. I am trying to write about the experience of being alive,

rather than the experience of the past in the present. However, I like minor keys; the dissonance and the ambivalence is more interesting.

**LV**. Your perception of Romania is very accurate and the poems you devote to Bucharest tower blocks and people imprisoned in them are effective, they convey the exact feeling of this place. How long did you spend in Romania and when?

**ND.** I visited Romania four times between 1990-1994. Visits of one or two weeks at a time. I set up a play writing workshop in which we asked UK playwrights to work with Romanian playwrights. We wanted it to be a creative challenge for both sides. We travelled to Bucharest, Sinaia, Târgu-Mures. The experience of meeting the Romanians involved in the project was a profoundly changing one for me. Here was an encounter with people of my age whose life stories were utterly different in many respects. The evolution of their lives was shaped differently, profoundly, painfully. And yet in many ways one didn't want to eulogise or mythologise this – that would have been too romantic, a kind of western European ostentation to admire and celebrate the difficulties of life under Ceausescu; this is central to the subject matter of *The Man in the White Suit* (title poem). I find it difficult to describe, other than in the poems. It was a great challenge to me. The remarkable Corina Suteu in particular had a strong influence on me. I was fascinated by the different ways in which people had responded to or adapted to the adversities of living in Romania at that time. I was shocked by the conditions of life in some respects (although it was always winter when we were there) and amazed by the beauty of parts of the country. It was a fascinating time and I met some remarkable people, Marcel Tohatan, Horia Girbea. I am very very relieved you think my poems are accurate about the country, as my great fear is to write with the narrow prejudice of an outsider using people's intimate stories for only my own ends. I hope the poems are sufficiently cynical or sceptical or humorous about my own role in their writing! This is important, whether in *The Story Box* or *The Man in the White Suit*.

**LV**. You make it a point not to start writing a poem before you have a story for it, like a kind of emotional planning. You are essentially lyrical, but your poems are suffused in narrative, in fiction. My theory is that contemporary poets (whom I have labelled Desperadoes because they will do anything to be different from one another, and this similarity in dissimilarity actually brings them together) offer more than a poem, they offer a biography. It may be their own or just an imaginary story, but the individual poem is caught in the web of fiction. Would you accept my describing your poetry as a net of narratives which catches colourful fish of emotion?

**ND.** I would accept that description, although I do not always know, or plan, the emotional story until it 'writes itself' in the slow process of composing the poem. I find I use narrative as a framing device, a way of magnetising the

emotional and historical and imagistic elements of the poem together. A way of bringing diverse and divergent elements into a harmonic relationship. I am not, so far, a poet who does the other thing – using the structures of argument and rhetorical progression to structure the poem. I would like to have more intellectual rigour apparent in the structure of the poems, but I know I also respond to poetry that compels at the level of emotional progression.

**LV**. I have been advised to give up the word *Desperado* because it infuriates most of the writers today. Nobody wants to be part of a group to which somebody else belongs, and they also refuse the idea that they might be regarded as a Desperado in the meaning of American films. My meaning is somewhat different. I have in mind these writers' courage to make their own law as they write, to discover their own new frontier, to fight all those who menace to follow. Solitude is a major contemporary feature. Unlike the others, you frown less, your poems are relaxed, even though intense. What is your reaction to this Desperado theory?

**ND**. I like the word Desperado – it has a frontier, individualistic adventure to it. Maybe people are wary of the hidden word 'despair' inside it? I have no sense of belonging to a group, only of writing myself, and knowing and following the work of a tiny group of friends who also write, who also are engaged with this strange thing, poetry. Generalising descriptions can bring with them both a revelation and a limitation, and perhaps poets in particular, who should have a profound sense of language, are cautious of the latter? I also think we live in an Age of Entertainment, and so a minor age for poetry. This is not necessarily a bad thing – it means we have the virtues of minor musical keys. But poetry, at least in the UK and US, is not integrated with mainstream discourse, nor is it generally valued for being marginal in a positive way. Compared with the modernist adventurers of the early part of the century, or with the great writers of the 18th century – Dryden, Pope, etc. – we are in the margins of the great book of the times. And that can be a very interesting place to be.

One area of 'Desperadoeness' for me is writing about gay themes and stories. I don't think many people are doing that. But I would *hate* to be called a 'gay writer'. It's limiting not liberating. It's one area of experience, not a defining area. I found a great deal of puzzlement in Romania about being gay – not to say sometimes plain hostility! Perhaps this has changed. It's not so very different in the UK.

**LV**. Your volume *The Man in the White Suit* (Bloodaxe Books, 1999) begins with a motto from Samuel Johnson about death: '...we shall receive no letters in the grave.' Your book is very little of a letter to the grave, it is so full of life, but you do have this obsession with death. Did you mean it to be a memento, or was it an accident?

**ND**. The book, as it came together, turned out to be united by the theme of death. But as you very rightly say, the awareness of death gives, as its dark reward, a keener sense of the richness of life. That’s why I picked that motto. Also I had a spare page to fill, no new poem, and the publisher asked for one. It was the last thing to go into the book.

**LV**. The Iron Curtain is an implicit element of your poetry. You write when this curtain is supposed to have vanished, but there is an economic iron curtain which you perceive and render. It is part of the picturesqueness of ex-communist countries that they are different, that they have a bedroom of Ceausescu’s daughter or a People’s House built, as you say, on ‘seven thousand houses’. It is the charm of otherness, in a way. What exactly appeals to you in these former communist places that you describe? What makes them poetic to you?

**ND**. I am very worried about being picturesque about the places I write about. I want to be accurate as a photograph, but not from a tourist brochure; more like Wolfgang Tilmans! Trying to tell the truth about what I see, and how I came to see it as I see it. However, there were quite amazing things in Romania, both exceptional and apparently ordinary, that seemed like gifts for poems; sleeping in that bed, visiting families in tower-blocks, doing a tour of Bucharest by winter night in 1991. Of course there are equivalents in London – I have written about them too. The otherness is important too, it is to step through the mirror... *Icons*, for example, is a poem about the destruction of beauty in Bucharest. Of course, I had not seen what existed before, and almost all cities now, to some extent, are ruins of their former glory. The ruination is what interests me, I think, not the former glory. The places themselves are always, in my poems, used as the settings for the characters, not as things in themselves. The tension between person and place...

**LV**. Politics is a major interest in your lines, even though you never dwell on it explicitly. You mention the ‘Velvet Revolution’, the TV broadcast of the Ceausescus’ execution. You are highly interested in the image of the world on the screen, or so it seems to me. The screen is a major coordinate of your life. You make your poems into short films. Am I wrong? What is your everyday profession?

**ND**. Good point about the short film; that is a clever idea. The short journey-time of a poem is like that of the short film, it has to compel and shape itself within that frame. I do work in films, as a script editor. I am in charge of seeing the projects through from beginning to end, creatively.

**LV**. Christmas and your grandmother often come together in your lines. Is it a private memory or just a made up scene?

**ND**. The memories are as truthful as I can make them. The Christmases with her were difficult, plenty of very black comedy. Nothing made up!

**LV**. Have you ever contemplated the idea that you could have been born under communism unless your grandmother had become an 'exile'? Or have I misunderstood those lines and they are not really autobiographical?

**ND**. I have also thought about never having been born, if she had not come to London. My father would never have met my mother. The chanciness of fate is a theme I am writing about a lot at the moment. There is another Nick Drake, a singer-songwriter who died young about 20 years ago. Sometimes people think I am him. So I have a long new poem about *Not Being Nick Drake*.

**LV**. Your *Man in the White Suit* is a desperately sensitive male who feels awkward and guilty. All your poems are supported by a secret and never explicit sense of guilt, which I detect in every situation you imagine. Could you explain that guilt, if you admit it is there?

**ND**. The guilt is the guilt of writing about other people, of using their lives to make something (the poem) for myself. The poem can never be adequate to the person to whom it is dedicated. The guilt is intrinsic to the whole process. There is an unresolvable and fascinating problem at the heart of it all, between the origin in life, and the way imagination and language translate this into poetry. It has to be registered at the heart of the act, or the poem has misled the reader and itself about its origins and its methods. There is always personal guilt too, in that one writes the poem but one may not be able to change the life of the person depicted. They may never even read it. The poem *In Memory of Vincent Cox* was written as an address to my oldest friend. It took years to write. I finally dared to show it to him last year and he was very moved. But he might not have been – he might have felt the poem was a betrayal.

**LV**. Your poems take place in a universal city, with a few London features and a very general feeling of out-of-nature. You are not a poet of pastoral landscapes. Would it be right to state that a street means more to you than a field?

**ND**. Yes, I find rural landscape is not a good subject for me. It doesn't get me going poetically. Although I love other writing in that genre, like Elizabeth Bishop's. I find our times are more distilled and present in the cityscape. Maybe one day I will be able to go back to the fields and the *fetes champetres*, but I'm sure they will be mass-produced harvests and huge steel barns and nuclear power stations by the sea.

**LV**. Is this an only volume of verse for you? Is poetry your calling or just a *violon d'Ingres*?

**ND**. This is my first true volume. Before that there was a pamphlet called *Chocolate and Salt* – some of the poems are in this book. I also wrote a book about Yeats. I am working on a new book now. It might be called *On not Being Nick Drake*. Poetry is my calling, yes. I do other, related things to make a living, which also feed back into the writing. I don't want to be a teacher or a reviewer or a journalist, or even live the so-called Literary Life; so I prefer this. Wallace Stevens worked in insurance! Anything that gives access to life works for me.

**LV**. Your lines are amazingly and comfortably clear. Some of your contemporaries build poetry in a fortress of incomprehensibility and rejoice at their crossword puzzles. Some contemporary critics do exactly the same. What do you think of both poets and critics whose language is hard to understand?

**ND**. Thank you! I like a rich and complex clarity in writing. But I also love poets whose poetic language is idiosyncratically their own. Rich poems do take time to reveal themselves, that is in their nature. Obscurity pretending to be complexity, however, is a waste of space. There's a style at work in some quarters, where meaning is broken down so far that all the poet has to do is assemble some poetical sounding phrases and present them as the work. What rubbish – poetry is about the articulate resolution of its own propositions.

**LV**. A last minute thought: could you sketch your life for the reader behind the stage, who would like to know Nick Drake the person, the biography behind the poems? And a reason for writing poetry?

**ND**. I write poetry because that is how I think and how I can think through my feelings and ideas. Poetry has a claim to truth, and I am trying to follow that path. I was born in 1961, grew up in a town north of London, my mother died when I was sixteen; life changed forever. I went to Cambridge University, studied English Literature, then went to help to edit the letters of Robert Graves living in a small house in the mountains in the south of Spain – near Granada. Very remote, very rural, very wonderful. Came back to London, worked at various odd jobs, decorating, etc; then started to read plays for the National and Royal Court theatres. Became literary assistant at the National Theatre, finding new writers and new work. Moved to the Bush Theatre as literary manager, commissioning new writing and putting on eight new plays a year with the artistic director, Dominic Dromgoole. Moved into the world of film about five years ago, now head of development for a large independent film company. That's the facts! As for the rest – read the poems...

February 13, 2002

## Ian Duhig, *I do mock literature and take it seriously at the same time*

Interview with **IAN DUHIG** (born 9 February 1954), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** *The Bradford Count, The Mersey Goldfish*, *Nominies*, your volumes of poetry so far. The cover of *Nominies* has an 'angel of the badly-loved (by Ross Wilson)' in the middle. *The Bradford Count* has a poem entitled *The Badly-Loved*. I detect a pattern here. Language is your badly-loved mistress. Are you mistreating her or is your poetry just a tender game?

**IAN DUHIG:** There is a connection between Ross Wilson's painting 'The Angel of the Badly-Loved' on the cover of *Nominies* and my poem called 'The Badly-Loved' in *The Bradford Count*. My title in a poem about Apollinaire relates to his 'Chanson du Mal-Aimé' and although 'Mal-Aimé' is usually Englished as 'Ill-Loved', I chose 'Badly-Loved' because it allows two readings, 'greatly loved' and 'incompetently loved'. Ross's image was made for a poetry conference in Northern Ireland in November 1993 put on by the Worker's Educational Association, which lays on courses for ordinary people outside the usual educational institutions, and which has employed me several times in the past. I wasn't involved in organizing it at all, but they asked me if they could use the title in the sense that contemporary poetry in these islands is, they thought, aptly described by that ambiguous expression. Ross is a marvelous artist who was working on an angel sequence – his 'Word Angel' looks down on me from above my fireplace as I write this –, who has connections with poetry, including painting the portraits of Walcott, Brodsky and Heaney, as well as covers for the traditional Irish music group 'Altan'.

**LV**. You can rhyme, but you mock at music, you can follow a diabolically regular rhythm, but you split with laughter at the mere attempt. Poetry is not exactly music for you. What is it?

**ID**. You're right that poetry for me is close to music, but not the same thing for what I think are very important reasons. If poetry is merely lyrics, then it is vulnerable to Voltaire's 'Anything too stupid to be said gets sung'. Neither is it completely intelligent discourse (or the kind I like isn't) because it is also beautiful and puts me into a stupor of admiration. Poetry's a little from Column A and little from Column B, the alchemy of mind and heart.

**LV**. You seem so proud of being Irish, like Joyce, Yeats, Wilde, Swift... They are your private history. You take your handling of words from Joyce, your humour from Wilde, your bitterness from Swift. Where exactly – unless you answer merely, 'literature' – is your home?

**ID**. My attitude to nationality is best expressed by the epigraph from Hugh of St.Victor at the front of my first book, *The Bradford Count*

'The man who loves his homeland is a beginner; he to whom every soil is as his own is strong, but he is perfect for whom the entire world is a foreign country.'

I suppose I regard nationality as like the major food groups, balancing all of them would be ideal but whatever variety you can manage is desirable.

**LV**. Your life is at this point of our interview a mystery to my readers. When were you born, what have you studied, what are you doing for a living? Would you like to be a full-time poet? Or a full/part-time anything else?

**ID**. I was born in 1954 in London – I wanted to be near my parents, who'd only just emigrated there from County Limerick. My father had been in the Irish Army, where he was an expert on all weapons from small arms to light artillery, oddly in the army of a neutral country. However, when he left there was no work, so they all came to London (I had seven older brothers and sisters born and brought up in Ireland) and my father worked in a dairy in Cricklewood for thirty years – I remember him in D.H. Lawrence's phrase, 'the Father of Milk'. My mother did shopwork but at home she constantly recited the vast amounts of poetry she knew by heart in both English and Irish, which is how they were taught the subject in her youth. I went to Catholic schools which I left at sixteen, though after several years of menial and manual work I took exams at night school and went to Leeds University. After that I worked with homeless people for fifteen years in projects in London, Yorkshire and Northern Ireland until I was made redundant. Since then I have taught and written, in whatever combinations made me a living.

**LV**. Your sense of humour is something so intensely your own that I would not dare say you share it with others. It is, to my mind, a common feature of the Desperado poets, but, of course, each has his own path. Desperadoes do not like to be birds of a feather and flock poetically together. They want to be worlds apart. You are universes away from your contemporaries. Sometimes your lines are really hard nuts to crack. One needs linguistical nimbleness to follow your

mind. What do you expect your reader to do: sympathize, smile in disbelief, study you scholarly (pen in hand), or enjoy you and nothing more?

**ID**. I believe humour in these islands has a class dimension, the less power you have the stranger they seem. It was related to how I consumed poets like Eliot too. His obscurity is comfortable because it is completely available to those with the appropriate cultural resources. However, when you write poetry relating to cultural resources not of the ruling classes, such as that of the working class, their traditions or those of the regions, many people get upset or accuse you of willful obscurantism. Yet this is exactly the direction the English language is heading away from being a national tongue and towards more a sort of cross between Esperanto and Dog Latin, a technical code adapted to local circumstances – there are more people learning English in China now than speak it in the U.S.A. Someone has described pressures on its use in the future as being the balance between identity and intelligibility. I'm sure I fall off that tightrope all the time but I'm not sure I could do it any other way.

**LV**. Your poems are hoaxes, relying on hidden changes of the words, swift and hardly perceptible. Association of meanings, instability of sounds is what you mainly use. You worship and yet mishandle words in every possible way. I have the impression that the poem exists, for you, at the level of the word, each word is a poem in itself. How long does it take you to write a page? Do you feel at ease when you write, before you begin, when you have completed a poem or at last when you talk about it, as you do now?

**ID**. I suspect the apparent differences between this generation of poets from each other will resolve into similarities soon enough. A suspicion of the political implications of language I believe will be a common theme. You use the word 'hoax': it derives from the expression 'hocus pocus', a parody of 'hoc est corpus' the moment of transubstantiation in the Catholic mass. Salman Rushdie has already pointed out English's facility for racial insult: nigger, yid, spic, dago and so on. In Northern Ireland, before you even get to words, letters themselves, even fragments of letters act as shibboleths in the original sense of that word – Protestants say 'aitch' for 'h' while Catholics pronounce it 'haitch' – you have given away potentially fatal information before you have finished any comprehensible statement. How is this language to be decommissioned? It does slow the writing down a bit, but what can you do?

**LV**. You are a Rabelaisian poet. You laugh big, you see big, you tolerate Everests, yet you write mostly short poems, one page usually. How does your appetite for poetry put up with this power of concentration? Do you write everything your instinct puts on your plate or do you choose? According to what?

**ID**. I prefer to keep poems to a page for the same reason I don't like to have to turn over a tape in the middle of a song. Also, there is just so much I find interesting in the world I want to register that special intensity and move on. Poems are sex, novels are marriages.

**LV**. I had a very hard time detecting influences in your lines. A little bit of Eliot (the Philomel and the Procne mention, possibly, and then *Babylon*, and *Poem Ending with a Sausage*), Yeats and Joyce mentioned once or twice. I know a Desperado is very sensitive to his uniqueness, as I said, and will not belong if he can help it, yet I have to ask: who are your literary masters and who your friends, however different from you? Is there anyone whom you would be willing to join on the literary scene?

**ID**. It may be that so vast are the range of influences on me that they cancel each other out. I am interested a lot in my contemporaries, including those associated with Picador. The Irish poets who started publishing after the 60s made a big impression on me and I find quite a lot of poetry does translate well, even its humour – I laughed loud and long at Sorescu's man with a halberd.

**LV**. You are not in the least afraid of four-letter words but never abuse them. There is a basic decency in your poems, which does not happen in American poetry, for instance, or anyway, not in most of it. You take vulgarity as far as laughter goes. The readers, I am sure, if they are like me, must sense your essential decency and even shyness. There is tenderness where you most avoid it, which is almost everywhere. Quoting good old Eliot, what is *the use of Poetry* in your opinion?

**ID**. I do have moral, ethical and political convictions but I do feel shy about assuming they are necessarily the best. I think poetry allows for tentativeness, or at least I hope so. Poetry has many uses from purifying the language of the tribe, to debauching the language of the tribe and from suggesting possible truths to advancing total lies with complete conviction. All I can say with confidence is that other people's poetry has made me think as well as feel and I don't think the world's problems include people thinking too much.

**LV**. If you could, I think you would bar all understanding of all written language but that achieved via a sense of humour. Irony is worshipped by all Desperadoes, as a last resort, after twenty centuries of earnestness. Previous writers may have laughed at human folly, but never at the folly of words. You undermine literature from its foundation, the very use of letters. When you form a word, you laugh and it comes out changed. Am I wrong to say that you forge new birth certificates for good old English words? Is that just fun or also fulfilling?

**ID**. This is probably a fine point of translation, but nobody called me ironic until I went to university. Before then I was sarcastic. I think this is a class thing as well. Aristotle said wit is educated insolence and I'm not sure I'm educated enough. If irony is not saying exactly what you mean, all art does that. It is also a function of language, which forges its own birth certificates to disguise the fact that ordinary people are the mothers of invention. The word 'politician' now is quite respectable, though in Shakespeare's time it was a plain insult. Knowing this can be fun and fulfilling.

**LV**. Most poets avoid directness by using lyricism. Your poems are a race which conceals meaning in a manner that suggests thoughts that brush you too swiftly (word that ought to derive from Swift a little bit) to be uttered in full, so you compress several in just one word and move on to the next compression. Are you aware that you are using literature in a similar way to the manner in which crossword puzzles do? All Desperado literature is a huge crossword puzzle, meaning to challenge more than just appease. How would you describe the act of writing poetry?

**ID**. Don Paterson put this well when he said poems are crosswords in which the reader is the compiler. Everyone accepts the 'intentionalist fallacy', that divining the writer's motives is the way to understand literature. Compression is the distinguishing feature of poetry, the feature which allows the words to have resonance and create a space around themselves like penicillin in a culture of disease. I would describe the act of writing poetry differently between different poems, never mind between different poets.

**LV**. A memorable line goes, 'This is going to be a Godless century' (*Archbishop Mar Jacobus Remembers the Baron*). I wonder what you think the 21rst century will bring for poetry... When you are 'old and grey and full of sleep', what will they say your poetry has achieved?

**ID**. I think the new century will vex poets in new ways as they always do. It's all material, to be brutally pragmatic. For a while I don't know what to do about something, and run around like a hungry man with a fork when it's raining soup, but we all make our words into spoons in time. When I am old and grey I will be too deaf to hear what anyone says about my poetry.

**LV**. In *Note* a line mentions 'the snuff that dreams are made on'. Poetry is both an ideal and an addiction for a poet like yourself. Have you written anything else, fiction, criticism, drama?

**ID**. Kipling said words were the most powerful drugs available to humanity. He should have tried crack. Addiction is a complicated thing – I've worked in a few drugs projects. The sociologist Jock Young once made the case for love as being like addiction, you want it all the time, you ignore evidence staring you in the face about negative consequences of it and so on. It's a matter of taste. Some people like the wine of prose, some like it distilled again into brandy. I've tried prose and drama but not with much pleasure, conviction or success.

**LV**. You are a consummate actor and you also like masks a lot. It helps you to protect your privacy. Women poets are more generous with their biography on the page. You reveal precious little, and even what you do say is said mockingly. What is the stuff of your poetry, if we come to that?

**ID**. You don't have to worry about protecting your privacy as a poet in Britain. I'm just not sure that what there is of me to reveal will be an edifying spectacle. There's lots of ingredients in my poetry including elements working against each other, like sweet and sour.

**LV**. *Old Shanghai* ends with 'You are guilty/ and being hanged by your own narrative thread.' Your poems are very cautious around stories, you seem afraid you might be nailed down to the old hybridization of literary genres, which mixed fiction, drama and lyricism in one (see Joyce and Eliot). When you tell a story, it becomes a joke. You mock at literature, yet take the WORD very seriously. Would you be very angry if I said you had a lot in common with the Joycean use of telescoped terms? Must you be the inventor of your skill or do you accept sharing the copyright with others?

**ID**. I do mock literature and take it seriously at the same time, but anyone who is passionately attached to a football team will have similar mixed feelings. We Chelsea supporters tell very good jokes against our own team. It is all shared; there can be no ownership of poetic ideas any more than Cruyff being the only footballer allowed to make a Cruyff Turn.

**LV**. Reading you I experienced the fear I might not really know English at all. I had to question my every step, every word I thought I had understood. The reader has to check his safety belt whenever he reads a new group of letters. Your poems are challenging (not at all horror) trains. They disestablish understanding, unbalance what we usually take for granted, the common meanings, the ready-made phrases. You walk your language as you would a tight rope. Is this your aim? Why/not?

**ID**. I think a lot of people reading my poetry think I don't know English at all. As I've said, some of this is I think a function of the language but also poetry isn't plain exposition. Someone complained to the painter Turner that his pictures were indistinct and he replied 'indistinctness is my forte.'

**LV**. In support of my previous question, I have chosen a line from your third volume (from the poem *Nominies* itself): 'Why is six afraid of seven?/ Because seven eight nine.' The whole poem is a delightful demonstration that everything can rhyme with everything else, and the more unexpected the rhyme, the happier you sound. This is another Desperado feature: debunk rhyme, while sticking to it stubbornly. It is the contemporary ideal to shock rhyme into self-doubt: Am I necessary to anyone? Is poetry my slave? And your mocking answer is, By no means. Irony is the key. Play upon rhythms, rhymes, images, and prove them all wrong. You destroy a lot. Describe to us what your building dream sees at the end of this pyramid which is your poetry...

**ID**. What's the opposite of debunking? Bunking? I'm guilty of both. Creation is destruction, as with Ogun, the Yoruba god of both. Rhymes in English depend on accent and have different realities in the mouths of different speakers. In my poem 'Nothing Pie' 'pudding' and 'budding' are half rhymes for my father and full rhymes for my son with his Leeds accent. It's less about being a Pharaoh raising a pyramid than raising questions like why in the English King James Bible after God instructs Moses to go to the Pharaoh. He then tries to kill him in a hotel…(Exodus 4. 21-24.)

January 2002

## Ruth Fainlight, *Writers can have some effect on the world at large*

Two interviews with **RUTH FAINLIGHT** (born 2 May 1931), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** You are a quivering poet. Your lines have a frail and tenacious life, and this paradox makes you, in my mind, what I call a Desperado poet. I do not mean despair. Desperado is a name for the poetry of the last few decades, colloquial, natural, diary-like, contradictory, often defiantly shameless, even more often reluctant to confess or reveal. The Desperadoes make up a movement formed of writers who are similar in dissimilarity. They always deny they belong to any trend and refuse to be classified. To begin with, I wonder if you would accept being one?

**RUTH FAINLIGHT**: According to your definition of the label, I can accept that I share the characteristics of what you call a Desperado poet. (Though I must tell you that there seems something faintly comic about that term; the definition of *Desperado* in the Oxford English Dictionary is: ‘A desperate or reckless man; one ready for any deed of lawlessness or violence’, and the word is almost only ever used to describe the villain in a Western, a ‘cowboy’ movie. I fear you might create an unfortunate impression with that word, which would be a great pity, because your characterisation and description of what you call Desperado poetry, and of my poetry, is extremely perceptive.)

**LV**. *Two Blue Dresses* almost defines your poetry when it mentions, in a different context, ‘The probability/ Of loneliness’. All Desperadoes face life alone, emphatically and indomitably so. They refuse compassion. As a writer, you also master your sympathy. Your poetry is either natural, on the dumb side, or ironical. Is refusal of avowed sensibility an aim for you, or is it just a spontaneous reaction which you do not explain?

**RF.** I am not conscious of making any effort to suppress expression of emotions.

I do not understand, nor exactly agree with, what you say here: for example: that my poetry is *natural*. For me, poetry is a highly conscious and self-aware – though not necessarily self-conscious – art form. (On the other hand, you are right to use the word because since my childhood, writing poetry has been a natural activity for me.) But I want to make it quite clear that I distrust the blurting outpourings of ‘spontaneous’ or ‘poetic’ poetry. When students or young poets proudly tell me that they do not work on their ‘poems’ because they do not want to lose the first ‘inspiration’ – as if they feared to brush the colour off the butterfly’s wing – I try to explain that to make a poem sound simple and inevitable requires a great deal of time, thought, knowledge and effort. I work on a poem for days, weeks, sometimes months before I can begin to think it has come close to what I want and hope it to be. Almost all my poems go through

many drafts. And sometimes years later I see that something needs to be changed, sharpened or simplified. There are poems of mine which have been published in four different versions: the first, in a magazine or periodical; the second in a book-length collection of my poems. The third version would be included in my first *Selected Poems*, and the fourth, in the revised and enlarged *Selected Poems* published in 1995. And if the opportunity arose in the future, I wonder if I could resist the temptation?

When you say my poetry is *dumb*, I assume that you mean something like mute or inarticulate – not stupid, as in American usage! I find this description difficult to relate to my work – or in fact to any literary product. How can verbal expression be inarticulate? Writing about inarticulate people is extremely difficult! What could be more 'artful' than a Hemingway story about such characters?

*Ironical* – sometimes.

**LV**. *Vertical* is a poem which, you say, sets you 'free from definition' by summing up your major themes: 'Jew, poet, woman.' You do have an air of heroic verticality in everything you write. I have a feeling you place that before the craft of poetry, which you take for granted and would rather keep unnoticed. Your poetry is subtle and persistent. What comes first for you as a poet: atmosphere, idea, music, sympathy?

**RF**. No, I do not take the craft of poetry for granted. Poetry is the expression of strong feeling, of course – but the medium for this expression is language, words, and the more skill and experience the artist has in the use of the chosen medium, the better she is able to express and convey the inspiration which motivates her. I suppose that of the four alternatives you offer, I would choose music.

**LV**. *The Demonstration* mentions your 'frankness'. You do strike the reader by the fervour with which you 'open' yourself (your word again). You do it, paradoxically again, both discreetly and vehemently. You have the strength of frailty, which is fiercer than blind strength. Do you derive it from your honesty versus the blank page? Is your honesty a manner of writing, a way of being, an essential of life?

**RF**. I hope I am honest in my life; but the honesty of the artist is not necessarily or directly connected to this quality. Honesty with regard to the work, the use of and respect for the medium – words, in the case of a poet – is essential.

**LV**. *My Position in the History of the Twentieth Century* is a disarming offer of true life to the mouth of greedy poetry. You offer yourself: 'I am not troubled because most people are taller./ Eyes always meet on the same level.' You mention the 'yellow star' and your 'good fortune' which took you 'far from the Holocaust.' We have already stepped into the 21st century. You end the poem with: '...what seemed most private and unique in me/ I find dependent on my

place and time.' Do your priorities change with the times? Do your themes adapt to age and ages? You are very nimble in your emotions. Are you trying to transfer this nimbleness to the kind of poetry you write? Do you set out deliberately to innovate this old craft?

**RF**. Yes, I believe that a careful reader can see that my themes have altered and developed with the passage of time. I also think that my command of the medium has improved (I hope this is true) – though of course, the basic, characteristic voice remains unchanged.

I did not set out deliberately to innovate the craft of poetry – but have always tried to write as well as possible, to improve my technical skills, because the more fluent one is – like an athlete trained to the full stretch of her potential – the more possible it is to express the most subtle perceptions and emotions. To me, the possibilities of form, structure and subject in the English language are limitless, and the more I read of English poetry, and poetry in other languages, whether in the original or in translation, the vaster and more boundless the field of poetry becomes.

**LV**. I think I can detect several Eliotian echoes in your poems, though I may be wrong, because you hide it very well. One of them is *The Cumaean Sibyl I, II*. I shall quote the second, because it is a summary of *The Waste Land*, to my mind: 'Because she forgot to ask for youth/ when Apollo gave her as many years/ as grains of dust in her hand, this sibyl/ personifies old age: and yet/ those withered breasts can still let down/ celestial milk to one who craves/ redemption: a dry tree, not a green/ the emblem of salvation.' Strange how you can hum Eliot's music of private images and yet be totally yourself and belong to another age. You beat Eliot at his own game. Is Eliot a model? Who else is? What is your relationship with the previous poetic age, that of the stream of consciousness?

**RF**. Eliot was very important to me as a young poet, and I am sure that certain of his rhythms etc. can be detected in my work, particularly the earlier poems. Another poet I studied as a young woman was Robert Graves. Both of them felt a deep connection to the Classical World, which I share.

Eliot was an influence on everyone of my generation but later it became more interesting for me to study the poets who had influenced him: the classical Latin poets, Milton, the English Metaphysical poets, and of course the French 19th century poets such as Baudelaire, Corbière, the Symbolists, etc. etc. As to other poets who have influenced me: probably every good poet I read opens my eyes to new ways of saying things, and of looking at and thinking about the world. This has happened all my life and, I am happy to say, still does.

**LV**. *It Must* is one of the many poems haunted by old age. Your sensibility is so fresh. You rely on your emotions and your poetry to keep you young. Writing is your strength. A Desperado manages to look like a citadel even when 'hopelessness' (your word, again) rages. Do you write in order to feel/ or because you feel strong?

**RF**. I think that as I have grown older, I have written more poems about age – which is not unusual. I don't think about being, or feeling, strong – although when I feel I have succeeded in expressing something honestly and skillfully, I do feel happy, which is always strengthening!

**LV**. *Divination by Hair* is a remarkable poem, at the same time helpless and aggressive, bitter and sweet, weak and tough. You pull out your white hairs in front of the mirror, but: 'Sooner or later I'll have to choose whether/ to be bald or white.' Your irony silences the grief. That is a very Desperado feature. What do you expect the reader's reaction to be? How would you describe your ideal reader?

**RF**. My ideal reader? I have never thought about that! Someone who can hear my voice in the poem, and who will understand my references and metaphors.

I am interested in your comment about 'Divination by Hair' — that '(Your) irony silences the grief.' That particular poem is an example of my use of irony; and yes, you have understood what I want the poem to do. Thank you.

**LV**. The same poem states: 'I fear/ the mask more than the skull beneath.' Unlike most Desperadoes, you do not wear a mask in your poems. You are disarmingly yourself, and the naturalness, untainted by poetic conventions, becomes your craft. Your major emotion is not fear, but the need to survive. You write forcefully, although the result looks like lace. You are a forceful ironist whose theme is fading femininity. Are you a feminist in beliefs? I would rather say you could not be farther from it, but your answer will be a more convincing statement, one way or the other.

**RF**. From early childhood I have been a feminist, in that I have always insisted that women and men are equal, should have equal rights under the law, equal pay, equal opportunities, etc. My earliest memories include being infuriated by men who denied this – and were usually very amused by my opinions. This is the definition of an old-fashioned feminist, I know. But I would never say that I am not a feminist, or take an anti-feminist position – and I am intrigued that you write that in your opinion 'you could not be farther from it'.

Feminism. I think this is a question of definitions of femininity. It's true that I am not the sort of radical campus feminist you so dislike.

**LV**. *My Rings* is a poem of helpless sadness: 'On my right hand since then/ I've always worn the ring/ my father and I chose/ as my twenty-first birthday present./ On my left hand, these months/ since her death. my mother's ring:/ the engagement ring he bought her/ half a century ago,/ and gave to me,/ after the funeral./...//I spread my hands on the

desk./ Prominent tendons and veins/ on the back, like hers;/ red worn skin of the palm/ that chaps and breaks/ so easily, inherited/ from my father. Even without/ the rings, the flesh of my hands/ is their memorial./ No need for anything/ more formal. Not gold/ nor platinum and precious stones/ can serve as well/ as these two orphaned hands.' Your emotions are coated in a wrapping of decency, but they rage inside the poem. The strong desire to restrain the grief while constantly talking about it is typically Desperado. You run from yourself and hope the reader will find you as you do not want to confess you are. How about critics? Have they found you out? What should a critic do in order to bring out what is most important in your poetry?

**RF**. I wrote *My Rings* after the deaths of both my parents, who died within ten weeks of each other. It was a hard time for me. I think your analysis of the poem is very acute.

**LV**. *Usually Dry-Eyed* ought to be looked upon as a Desperado credo: 'Tears make one impotent. Anger is needed.' Like many novelists contemporary with you, deep down, in the obscure, unverbalized but detectable meaning of your lines, you are angry. What are the roots of this mood? Is it a reaction against the menace of naked sensibility running away with your words, or does it work as a kind of poetic suspense, which sets the reader on the right track in the quest for the poet?

**RF**. So much makes me angry – much of it political in the sense that relations between the sexes are aspects of the political, and the exploitative relationship between different groups in society and different countries is political. Any form of cruelty makes me angry. But anger is not the best response – it is destructive for the one who feels it. I try to channel my anger: sometimes into action (for example, I am a member of the Writers in Prison Committee of English PEN), or into my writing – because I do believe (or hope) that writers can have some effect on the world at large.

**LV**. *Handbag* is a masterpiece of concentrated narrative and lyricism: 'My mother's old leather handbag,/ crowded with letters she carried/ all through the war. The smell/ of my mother's handbag: mints/ and lipstick and Coty powder./ The look of those letters, softened/ and worn at the edges, opened,/ read, and refolded so often./ Letters from my father. Odour/ of leather and powder, which ever/ since then has meant womanliness,/ and love, and anguish, and war.' As you advance in years, your poetry becomes firmer and clearer, richer. This short poem equals a whole novel. It includes most of your themes. I shall just choose one, which I have not yet pried into: the war and the holocaust. Did they leave any traces in you, or just in your fund of memories? Do your fears, of age, of loss, of solitude, of failure, have anything to do with that legacy coming from your parents?

**RF**. I am fortunate enough not to have had direct experience of the Holocaust, nor did my immediate family. But of course, being Jewish, it affected me profoundly.

The fears you question here: age, loss, solitude, failure; surely these fears are common to all humanity? The poet perhaps feels more intensely, and is able to express more articulately, the basic emotions whether of fear or joy shared by everyone. But I have always believed that I am quite 'normal' in my reactions and responses, and that they are much the same as everyone else's – and it is this belief which gives me the confidence to continue writing (and I hope, gives strength to my work).

**LV**. To end this interview, what do you expect of poetry and how do you expect criticism of poetry to behave? What question have you always wanted to be asked by an interviewer yet have not been, yet?

**RF**. We shall have to continue this interview process for me to arrive at the knowledge of 'the question I have always wanted to be asked by an interviewer yet have not been, yet'.

What do I expect of poetry? Hard to answer this question. All we know of the entire past and of everyone who ever lived is what has been recorded and remembered in literature. That testimony, that bearing of witness – not necessarily or only witness of great historical events, but also and equally importantly, of the smallest, simplest, most private aspects of human life – has been and I hope will continue to be the purpose of poetry and all forms of literature.

2003

## HONESTY, CLARITY, SIMPLICITY

**LIDIA VIANU:** Rereading your poetry, I find I cannot help choosing more and more poems for my anthology of Desperado poetry. I try to keep the selection within limits, but each new poem is as quotable as the previous one. What I mean to say is that your poetry grows on the reader. We had one first interview, before we actually met, and before I had read your latest *Selected Poems* and the latest three volumes. What is taking place now is more the beginning of a book on your creation than a real interview. An informal talk about a poetry that does not hide the poet, yet invites to a million questions. Actually, the questions are negligible here. Your reaction will be all that matters.

I will start with your name, predestined for your kind of texts: Ruth (as in the opposite of 'ruthless', and what splendid sympathy and warmth it is, too!), Fain (as in 'gladly', if I am not mistaken) and so very much Light. Your poetry, even at its saddest or most tragic, is so full of light. If you may have chosen your last name – which does not seem to be the case, your first name is definitely yours since birth. Has it ever occurred to you that life endowed you with the most beautiful pen-name? Have you ever thought of changing it?

**RUTH FAINLIGHT:** I'll answer the last part of this question first – no, it has never occurred to me to change my name. Because it is unusual, as a child sometimes I was teased about it – but this amused rather than upset me. Since I began to publish my poetry, at times people have come to me after a reading and remarked that Fainlight is a very *poetical* name; but until now the word itself has not been analysed, 'deconstructed' with the care you have given to it. What can I say – except thank you very much!

**LV**. An early poem (*Gloria*) muses:

My muse is in myself:
As past and future
Only exist
By my own need to think them...

Your muse, I should say, is the inner diary you keep of each little, everyday incident, which can easily become a poem, which can turn into art before you have had time to consider the change. You write poetry as you breathe. You turn air into poems. This is not a question, it is my strong feeling after reading all your volumes. Is it all right for you to use autobiography as a source for poems? So many poets reject it violently that it scares me to think how many impersonal

lines are being written. Asking my MA students in class what they expected of poetry today, the answer came promptly and unanimously: 'We want a being beyond the sheet of paper.' You are that being. My question is, what do you think of all those poets who invent masks, intertexts, cultured refuges from their own inner diary? Can the intellect replace the living soul?

**RF.** My most recent poem – and I'm not even sure that it is really finished – deals with this question: whether it is possible to write poetry without revealing oneself. I do not think it is possible. The poem is called *A Bowl of Apples*, and makes a comparison between the poet and the painter: my 'argument' is that, although a painter can look at a bowl of apples and see it only as a composition of volume, colour and line, to the exclusion of any other meaning, can ignore 'the implications/ of fading tones and softening forms', for the poet, 'Words force definition:/ the medium's limitation. …. // I cannot/ bring the apples into being/ and not reveal my own nature.' (Of course, it would be possible to argue that painters also cannot avoid revealing their own natures in their work, but … this is a poem, not a philosophical thesis!) I am absolutely convinced that, even if a poet chooses for subject what seems most distant from the personal, the preferred point of view and angle of approach, the choice of metaphor etc. etc., are all determined by the personal history of that poet. In any case, no writer ever tells ***'the truth'*** plain and simple; (least of all when writing autobiographically!) I would always sacrifice the accuracy of a factual detail for the sake of a rhyme or an assonance.

**LV**. *Vertical* is a poem you feel represents you, and I feel the same. 'Jew. Woman. Poet.' is a line your admirers know well. You have already made it clear that you are a feminist – an old-fashioned one, thank God – but being Jewish is not a statement your poetry cares to stress. How does Ruth Fainlight the Jewish woman feel about her Jewishness? I have the feeling this makes you more international, if anything. It does not have anything to do with religious belief, but a lot with the fate of the Wandering Jew, who is in many places at once and belongs to none (see *Country Cottage*). Would that be what you feel?

**RF.** This is an accurate perception of my feelings about being Jewish. I *am* Jewish – there is no way I could, or want to, deny it. The reaction of other people is part of one's 'Jewish consciousness'. And I am glad to have this rich heritage, about which I am learning more and more. But – as well as being an 'old-fashioned' feminist, I also remain an old-fashioned idealist, with anachronistic ideas such as internationalism, equality etc., and am deeply saddened when these ideas are scorned in the world of today. To me, the term 'rootless cosmopolitan', a critical epithet often applied to Jews, is a badge of honour! That is the sense in which I am Jewish. So yes, very 'international'.

**LV**. The same poem (*Vertical*) has a very Desperado statement, I think: 'But/ I am released by language,/ I escape through speech:/ Which has no dimensions (...)/... sets me free/ From whomsoever's definition...' I certainly cannot pin

you down to a group or a set of features, which is baffling and delightful. You are always somebody else, in a very refreshingly new poem. You escape any attempt at definition. I admit it is my ambition to define what is going on in poetry today, but it will probably be a kind of non-definition, because all Desperadoes – poets and novelists – deny belonging with somebody else, to a recognizable group. Similar in dissimilarity is the major Desperado feature, as I see it. You have already told me your reservations about the cowboy word I have chosen for my theory. The die is cast, hopefully the word will grow on readers, it is not for me to say. What I want to ask is: What do you make of this instinctive and Desperado-like desire all recent writers have to be their own trend, to be like nobody else, to be alone and unlike everyone? To take literature in their own hands and fight heir way beyond all known frontiers? Originality is essential to art, but what happens today is a hysteria of novelty. Do you feel it? How? What is it leading to?

**RF.** I think that since the time of the first artists we know about – by which I probably mean the ancient Greek playwrights and poets – some artists have wanted to align themselves into 'schools' or groups, and others, for 'temperamental' reasons, have rejected the idea indignantly and insisted that they are completely *sui generis*, with no connection to what anyone else is doing. Taking the long view, one can see that there is always a connection – the work of contemporaries always relates to and influences others working at the same time. **But there is absolutely no need for the artist to realise or acknowledge this.** So, in answer to your question – in fact I don't think that the situation is different now than it has ever been.

**LV**. *The Lace-Wing* has these three lines:

The intensity of our mutual
Examination exhausted me.
We almost exchanged identities.

I realize, reading them, that what I am looking for in a poem is not so much the personal story of the poet (his private life is his alone, after all) but precisely this emotional intensity you always have, with the grace of lace and the piercing effect of a needle stuck into flesh: you can describe your own love without revealing incidents too private to become art. You can find meaningfulness where others rush thoughtlessly – you fear to tread, yet go such a long way. Should I be more lenient with poets whom I dislike exactly because of the lack of private intensity? Can poetry do without it, replace it by imaginary translations, invented stories, sophisticated combinations of words and fancy rhymes which make understanding quite difficult?

**RF.** I do not know how it would be possible to write without being driven by emotional intensity. For me, *that intensity is another name for inspiration*. When I do not sense this intensity in the work of another poet – (depending on my mood and state of mind), either I think I am being particularly obtuse or I think that they are no good! So few of those who write poetry and publish poetry and even are regarded as important and significant poets, will be remembered twenty years (much less fifty or a hundred) after their deaths. A sobering and necessary thought.

**LV**. *Dinner-Table Conversation* is dedicated to Robert Lowell. I wonder why. It has a few remarkable lines:

I must build my own San Francisco: the place
Where hazard reigns and poetry begins.
Would I be less a woman or more a poet
Denying my own triumphs and defeats?

You have a particular humility, I do not think you could ever humiliate anyone, but are very vulnerable to others' attempts at putting you down. Your sense of decency prevents you from attacking anyone, but this does not mean your pride ever gives up. You are as indomitable as you are frail. Actually, you only look frail. Inside I suspect you are adamant. Am I wrong? Your poetry is not at all soft. You wield the words. Why does Lowell come in precisely in such a poem that asserts your strength?

**RF.** This is one of the poems based on a real incident. The occasion was indeed a dinner party where I was seated next to Robert Lowell, and his dismissive attitude to women poets or even the very idea of women writing poetry (which surprised me, because I knew his high opinion of Elizabeth Bishop), infuriated me. As far as I remember, I sustained my side of the conversation. Perhaps afterwards he even thought I was 'interesting' — but I knew that he was far too set in his opinions for my words to have any effect. The memory rankled; and it became necessary to my peace of mind to confirm my value as a poet to myself. Such experiences need a lot of brooding over before one gains enough objectivity and distance to make them suitable material for a poem. I don't remember how much time elapsed between the incident and writing the poem. Quite a long time, I imagine.

**LV**. *August Full Moon* describes your study 'Where the desk is placed in a corner between two windows...' Such details bring you very close to the text, in the text, actually. I find it natural that the reader cannot help starving for the private, the intimate, the revelation of another self in poetry. Can the poet deny his poem the privilege of being, even looking like a diary? Eliot once said, 'How unpleasant to meet Mr Eliot...' But we did meet him in his so-called (by himself) impersonal lines. This you have in common with him. We meet you, too. Where you differ is on the issue of

clarity. You make a point of writing so that everyone can understand. After Joyce, I think, the novel would have died if it had not found its way back to a clear story. After Eliot, I think, you felt you needed clarity in your lines in order to secure an audience. I have not seen one poem by you which does not have a clear meaning. I should also say that I have not seen one single poem without a meaning (which happens so often with others). Do you feel meaning and clarity should go together? How come you never write encoded poems (like Yeats once) and is it a willful choice?

**RF.** Sometimes I do not understand the meaning of one of my own poems until years later. I want my poems to be clear – BUT – poetry is not primarily merely another method for conveying a message**;** the music of the words, their sound and rhythm – the language **–** is what makes it a poem. Otherwise it is verse at best, propaganda at worst. (I'm not quite sure I know what you mean by 'encoded' poems, as applied to Yeats. Are you referring to his mystical ideas? Yeats was one of the most important twentieth century poets for me when I was young, and I still admire him immensely.)

**LV**. The mask is definitely a major poetic device. Yet I can't help feeling I must break the mask and taste an intimacy with the poet. I had thought it was only a peculiarity of my sensibility till a class of fifty students confessed they felt the same (after four years of reading poetry). Eliot bragged about impersonality and he could hardly have been more private and personal. I admit I hate impersonal poems. Desperado poetry can be very bitchy in that sense. It insists on sharing but refuses to say what. Shared emotion is beautiful, only it must be someone's, and the reader refuses to go all the way alone. A poem needs to belong, and by this small sentence I say it all. You yourself write:

Honesty, clarity, simplicity.
No hiding behind equivocations – (*Glass-Thoughts*)

You do not assume a mask. You are not afraid of yourself in the mirror of words. Would you mind if, beyond the emotion, the reader tried to rebuild the very story of your life? This is maybe going too far, maybe you resent the reader's desire to turn your poetry into a novel? But your volumes, as they follow one another, do reveal a plot. One of ageing, but also of ripening tenderness and of a uniquely sharp sensibility. Do you mind this? Did you aim at this hybridization, this mixture of poetry and fiction? I find it the highest achievement of a poet, which Eliot aspired to but could not reach, actually.

**RF.** Very interesting – the thought that reading through my collections of poems reveals a sort of autobiographical plot. I have not worked towards that end consciously – but I can understand why a reader could think this – and I accept it. I also love prose-poetry, and am always happy when I write a prose poem.

**LV**. And now a trifling matter (apparently): you talk so much about the moon. You say in *Moon*: 'Old reliable Moon, who /Always makes me write poetry./ My sister Moon.' Do you usually write at sunset or late into the night? Is your sign of the zodiac connected in any way to the influence of the moon? You obviously talk more about night and the moon than about bright daylight and the sun. Any reason for that?

**RF.** The Moon. My zodiacal sign is Taurus but (according to Ted Hughes, who was extremely interested in astrology) with the influence of Scorpio very powerful. But I am not fluent in this 'dialect', nor sure what those comments signify – and I have never tried to find out. I have been less interested in astrology than in other 'alternative' structures to comprehend 'the meaning of life'. From an early age I read everything I could find about mythologies from different parts of the world, and about religions, beliefs and cults (although I never joined one). I read a lot of psychology and anthropology. I have always been eager to understand more conventionally scientific explanations, and am an avid reader of scientific books (to the limits of my capability). Cosmology interests me more than astrology. But – to get back to the moon! Also from an early age, I have felt a strong affinity to, and connection with, the moon. The phases of the moon have always affected me, both as a woman (the menstrual cycle) and as a poet (poets are lunatics!). The muse of poetry is the moon, as far as I am concerned.

**LV**. I cannot help noticing a few Eliotian echoes, like 'Cancer (...) scuttling' , which reminds me of the 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ scuttling across the floors of silent seas...' It may be far fetched. On the other hand, I know Robert Graves too little and it seems it was he who really influenced your beginnings. You do have a poem entitled *My Position in the History of the Twentieth Century*, but it does not make things clearer fro me. Whom do you belong with? I asked this before: Could you name several literary friends, older and younger?

**RF.** *My Position in the History of the Twentieth Century* records my consciousness of being a rich, privileged white person – but also alludes to that recent period when I would have been an inferior, endangered 'untermensch' - i.e., a Jew in Europe during the Nazi period – and contrasts those two conditions, determined entirely by place and time. I don't think it has anything to do with literary influences.

I have been 'influenced' – and then cast off the influence – by all the great poets of English literature, from Thomas Wyatt through Milton, the Metaphysical poets, the Romantics; by Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Emily Bronte, Christina Rossetti, D.H. Lawrence and of course Eliot, Yeats, Graves, Auden – etc., etc., *ad infinitum.* (Then there is poetry in translation….) You ask who I 'belong with'? What more could one hope for than to 'belong' with them all!

**LV**. The sibyl is a favorite mask, maybe the only one, with you. The sibyl is the poet, the seer, sensibility, tragedy, art, the whole wide and doomed world. The sibyl is all your fears put together and well hidden. Were you trying to do that? Why a sibyl?

**RF.** I began the first Sibyl sequence (in *Sibyls and Others*, 1980) at the suggestion of the distinguished American sculptor and print-maker, Leonard Baskin, who wanted to collaborate with a poet on a book about sibyls, because he had begun a series of prints and drawings of sibyls. Then his (and my) good friend Ted Hughes mentioned to him that I would be a good choice, being well-informed on such matters. I accepted gladly. It was my first experience of working in this way; sometimes I wrote a poem in response to one of Leonard's images, sometimes he made an image in response to a poem. (Since then, I have worked with artists on several more books. The 'Sheba and Solomon' sequence in my new book was a similar 'commission' from an artist, the Brazilian sculptor and print-maker, Ana Maria Pacheco. She is still working on the images for the *livre d'artiste*. I have also collaborated on three books with Judith Rothchild, an American print-maker who lives in France. These books are always extraordinary luxury productions, terribly expensive, produced in very small editions, 25 to 50 copies, and are bought by rich collectors of the artist's work, not by poetry lovers!)

I am always grateful to the artists who ask me to work with them – it is another form of inspiration. In the same way, working with young composers – I have written three libretti, two for the Royal Opera House and one for a television production – has opened new possibilities for me.

It is only possible to work in this way with someone whose work you respect, and on a subject close to your heart.

The Sibyl was a perfect vehicle to express some of my deepest feelings – as you have understood very well.

**LV**. You find yourself, while *Deadheading the Roses*, 'in a losing fight against autumn'. This is the best description of your most touching, painfully piercing poems. Eliot called Yeats 'preeminently the poet of middle age', as I said, but you find even more to say than Yeats's 'a tattered coat upon a stick'. Middle age is for you a fact of life, even life itself, rather than a mere metaphor. You see it with a remarkable sense of humour. That is why I think that, versus Modernist Yeats, you are a Desperado: irony, clarity, simplicity, the admission that a poet needs his audience and must regain it. Even feminism can come in. Whatever the name, you do belong to after-Modernism. Do you see any common features for poets today (or is it my job to find those and your right to reject any labelling?)?

**RF.** It is accurate to say that I have been a poet of middle age. Now, perhaps,

I am becoming a poet of old age! (You will be interested to know that, choosing her ‘Personal Best’ among books published this year, the novelist Margaret Drabble included *Burning Wire*, saying: ‘*In the Dream* is the poem you need if you think you may be growing older.’)

**LV**. Only two of your poems have a fancy arrangement of words on the page: *Divination by Hair VI* and *Art*. In the first case, the manner is almost stream of consciousness. In the second it is more Desperado, it dreams of fiction while staying a poem. There is definitely rhythm and there is also a very discreet rhyme in your poems, but the music of your poetry comes more from inside than from the noise of words. I should call it a preverbal music. It is the music of your being. I think a real Desperado does not think half as much as Yeats or Eliot about uttered musicality: he is concerned with the music of this world and of other, revolving worlds of his soul, which is a universe. The Desperado poem has discovered only now the theory of relativity: rhyme is relative, it all depends on your ears. But meaning is essential and it has to reach the reader. Some of my interviewees so far have told me that rhyme was essential to them, and, frankly speaking, at times I had to take great pains to find it in their poems. I was too interested in their meaning to notice the art of the word. How important is this art to you? Would you think of your poetry as music above all, or meaning and whatever mastery of language the moment allows?

**RF.** See, on the ‘writersartists’ website:

<u>Statement of poetic belief – theory and practice</u>:

‘I try to keep the words of a poem close to the feelings and sensations that inspired it, in the hope that it will inspire the same feelings, recognitions, and memories in its reader. In this way, she or he become involved in its reality**,** even a participant in its creation – because reading is an active relationship between reader and writer.

But writing is a relationship between writer and language. A poem develops organically from the first inspiring phrase. That phrase, or cluster of words, includes every essential element of the poem, and the poet’s work is to allow all its potential of sound and meaning to realise itself. And like every other living organism, its development is a unique combination of unassailable laws and the entirely unexpected.’

**LV**. In *The King Must Die* I noticed two lines: ‘I know that I am dying with the country/ I still love and call myself.’ I should not take them out of their context, but sometimes this is what an interview is all about: you find emblematic lines and try to build a profile. When you talk about your parents, your son, your tenderness for the man in your life, you take intensity with a grain of salt. You mock at yourself out of the corner of your serious eye. This is revigorating and makes the reader stronger, it makes him feel in control. Is that how you feel when you write?

**RF.** Irony – the grain of salt – is an essential element of my nature and thus of my poetry also; so I am delighted, not surprised, that you are aware of it.

**LV**. *Like Shadows on the Lawn* begins with 'sentences form in my head/ float in and out of my mind.' It gives me the feeling that you live in a volcano of words and the hottest burst out, like magma. Some Desperado poets impose a certain coldness on their lines, that air of impersonality I disapprove of (nothing new in that). The real poets give in to the cataclysm. You actually eat your cake and have it: you write in cold blood about 'the horror of daybreak' (Yeats again). You are more Yeatsian than Eliotian in your reactions (not in the verbal encoding of your poems, though). Your major discovery and step forward is that poetry can be, must be clear. Has it ever happened to you to think in confuse words and then go back to the page and clarify the text, make it accessible on purpose? Or, maybe, the reverse?

**RF.** For me, revision is always an attempt, **firstly**, to get back to the initial impulse and feeling which 'inspired' the poem. (In the complete text of the piece 'Statement of poetic belief', I deal with this in more detail.)**;** and **secondly**, to express the subject and its associations as clearly as possible. I never consciously try to confuse or to obscure – neither in syntax nor imagery.

**LV**. More than falling in love (you fall in love with life over and over again in all your poems), I find images of marriage in your poems. *To Break This Silence* mentions 'him with whom I share my house and life', with whom you spend 'Hours each day together'. You also murmur, 'The habit/ of our mutual isolation...' The conclusion is: 'we/ have come to be the other's fate and climate.' Your life is shared with the novelist Alan Sillitoe, who must somehow fill in the gaps: where you are tough he is sweet, where you are mild and gentle he is vertical and uncompromising. He looked that way to me when I visited you both for a brief moment in London. I was for the first time in the capital of English, the language I had learned under communism as a dead language, and the majesty of the City of London overwhelmed me. I did not feel like doing much or talking to anybody at all, but when I phoned you and heard in your voice a kind of burning impatience which no merit of mine could have spurred, I felt ashamed and hurried to your house. You met me and my daughter, with Alan close behind. After a formal visit to Peter Ackroyd – wonderful person, but with whom I had not managed to find anything in common the previous day – you offered me all the Oriental warmth I had not even dared dream of. I felt I had known you for ages, for lives. Was it the race that we shared? One of your poems says you befriend strangers easily, maybe recklessly. You certainly did befriend me. I took with me that day a piece of your soul and Alan's gentleness. How did you meet him and what has kept you together?

**RF.** A few years ago I wrote a 10,000 word autobiographical piece for *Contemporary Authors,* W.H. Wilson Co. World Authors 1985-1990. They must have a web-site, so any information will be available there. But, with regard to this sort

of question: in my opinion, biographical material is not needed to understand and appreciate poetry. I certainly did not know – nor was curious about – the personal lives of the poets who were important to me when I was young. Biography seems to be an obsession of the present moment!

**LV**. Thinking back, I see you as more, much more than just ‘vertical’. You are relentless, you pursue poetry with stubborn force. As you yourself say, you are an ‘unrepentant nature’ (*Here*), you are your ‘own tamer’. But deep down, there is ‘the pain/ that shapes and haunts me’ (*Stubborn*). What pain? Why pain? Your poems carry a burden of the soul rather than the elation of sensibility. Your own sensibility is thoughtful, not enthusiastic. Strange to say that, because you yourself are a person who can suddenly become extremely enthusiastic. Again, is this meditative pain the heritage of your race?

**RF.** ‘Is this meditative pain the heritage of your race?’ you ask. Maybe. Perhaps. Probably. The whole project of writing poetry is an attempt to understand oneself. If I could define myself so easily, so definitively, I would not (would not need to) write poetry.

**LV**. The poem *Author! Author!* confesses:

What I am working at and want to perfect —
my project – is the story of myself: to have it
clear in my head, events consecutive,
to understand what happened and why it happened.

I wander through department stores and parks,
beyond the local streets, seem to be doing nothing;
then an overheard phrase or the way light slants
from the clouds, unravels the hardest puzzle.

It takes all my time, uses so much energy.
How can I live, here and now, when the past
is being unwound from its great spindle, and tangles
forgotten motives around the present? Rather

than set the record straight, further knowledge

complicates. I cannot stop the action
to make a judgement, or hope for better.
Every gesture casts a longer shadow

into the future, each word shifts the balance.
I see myself as one more character
in this extravagant scenario,
the story not yet finished. And who's the author ?

My question exactly. How do you see yourself? You are so considerate, yet often ruthless, when it comes to human stupidity. My students felt they were in very close touch with you when they read my selection of your poems. And yet they knew next to nothing of the 'scenario'. Is your life what you expected or wanted it to be? Why is every day like a blessing (because this is the feeling I get while reading you)?

**RF.** The poem you quote, *Author! Author!* is one answer to the previous question. I should very much like to believe that every day is a blessing and that life itself is the great privilege – but rarely achieve this blessed state of mind! It is very difficult to forget the cruelty and injustice of the world and to accept that it always has and always will exist**;** to try to explain it to oneself. This could be regarded as a religious attitude**;** perhaps it is. But, although I know that I have a religious nature (whatever that means) – as I believe every poet has – I do not adhere to the practice of any religion.

**LV**. *In Memoriam H.P.F.* states:

I shall not meet my dead again
as I remember them
alive, except in dreams or poems.

There are your parents and your brother, and also your aunt, on the one side, and many more whom I am not aware of. Who are they? In what way were they dear to you?

**RF.** Yes, *In Memoriam H.P.F.* is dedicated to my brother, Harry Paul Fainlight.

**LV**. One of my PhD candidates has entitled her dissertation *The Sirens' Knot*, after your poem *The Knot*, which ends with: 'Words would form a knot and start a story.' All your poems tell a story. It is one of my major ideas that the

hybridization of literary genres – the mixture of poetry and fiction – which was so fervently desired by the modernists is only happening now, for the Desperadoes. In consequence, novels become sequences of longer poems or just haiku (see Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd or Kazuo Ishiguro), while poems desperately plunge into stories, as if to dodge the romantic overflow of lyricism, to break the fury of what tradition thinks poetry should be (strong feelings, 'emotion recollected in tranquility', if Wordsworth is to be taken for granted). The Desperado poet is not at peace when he writes and he also denies having strong feelings: he pretends he feels nothing. You do not clamour feeling, either, but you allow it to glimmer and actually it gets very strong while the poem builds up. How do you get along with your contemporaries, with those poets who write coldly, trying to protect their privacy against the reader's starving desire to share? How do you work out this combination between imaginary story and private hell?

**RF.** Are you asking about narrative poetry? Quite a lot is being written in England and the USA recently. (I am in our cottage in the country at the moment, so cannot refer to my books, but I can think immediately of Les Murray the Australian poet, Mark Jarman and Rita Dove in the States, Jackie Kay and Craig Raine and Bernadine Evaristo in England – among many others who have successfully written 'novels' in verse. And of course there are earlier poets like Robert Frost, ('The Death of the Hired Man'). Wordsworth wrote his autobiography as poetry! Tennyson. Robert Browning. Elizabeth Barrett Browning ('Aurora Leigh'), Byron's 'Don Juan', etc.

**LV**. Femininity and age go hand in hand for you. A poem (*August*) muses: 'August is like a woman who's already thinking/ that she'll soon be forty.' Sadness and pain become you, because you do not complain, you just think and express them through. Femininity, for you, also implies uncertainty, I think. In *Japanese Syllabics* I find the following:

my constant need for reassurance,
my placatory smile – the nodding
head-piece of a jointed wooden doll,
agreeing, agreeing.

Talking about Japan, of course (when did you visit it? why and what was your reaction besides what this poem says?), you wonder, 'am I imposing/ an alien system of values/ and totally misunderstanding?' You betray your fear you might hurt someone unwillingly, your considerate gentleness here. This is so much like a woman. When you say you are a feminist, I think you are just being a woman through and through, a woman of your times, who wants to be man's equal (not to replace him, as recent feminists dream). What does it feel like to be a woman/ wife/ mother? A woman poet? Would you rather write in a genderless way?

**RF.** I was in Japan for a few weeks in the mid-1980s. Alan was invited by International PEN to speak at their annual conference, and they kindly included me in the invitation. Then his Japanese publisher extended our stay. I was absolutely fascinated by the country. I have always admired many aspects of the Japanese aesthetic, and was fairly well prepared to appreciate many things. You might notice that the group of poems about Japan is written in formal structures: syllabics, sestina, sonnet etc. – which seemed appropriate for such a formal society. (And I adore Japanese food!)

You ask if I would like to write in a genderless way. I am a woman – so everything I write is written by a woman. There's no way to escape it, I can't evade it! That would be as impossible as trying to deny being Jewish. I mean precisely what I say, when I write: 'Jew. Woman. Poet.'. And yet – I know that not only as a poet but also as a spiritual being I exist 'beyond/ below/ above gender'. In my recent poem, *In the Dream*, I write:

In the dream I was an old, smiling woman
— like one of those Japanese wise men
(squat-bodied, knotty-limbed, head tilting back
as if to make eye-contact with something
only he can see above him in the sky)
you might find in a woodblock print.

In the dream I was as free as they.
Decades of tension and vanity had slid like
a silken cloak off my shoulders. Now,
the coarse weave of my dress was faded and worn,
garb of a pilgrim or hermit (though others
moved beside me on the road, through the market),
and I knew this was a crucial moment: when
I woke I could choose – for the rest of my life
if I wished – to be that woman.

**LV**. *Until You Read It* is such a considerate poem. You certainly have regained the audience Modernists may have lost. The reader can only feel exhilarated when seeing it:

Like music on the page
which has to be played

and heard, even if
only by one person,
this word, this phrase,
this poem, does not exist
until you read it.

You were born in New York. American poetry today is so aggressive and unfeminine. So haughty. Some poets think the whole world should revolve around their enigmatic creation. You do not. What does it feel like, to be born an American, half-Jewish, living in England, talking to intellectuals all over the globe, answering questions asked by a Romanian?

**RF.** Lidia, I am not half-Jewish. Both my parents were Jewish. Their parents were Jewish. I am entirely Jewish, whatever that means. (Rootless cosmopolitan!)

**LV**. In *Privacy on Lake Ohrid* you admit:

I can't resist,
early evenings,
staring into
lighted windows –

When I visited you, in mid-September, it was a sunny morning and I felt like staring and staring at those buildings and lives that were not only totally unlike mine, but also the ideal of my childhood and youth, when I was never allowed to talk to an English native speaker, when London was the name of another universe. I passed by a park near your house (we had arrived too early and whiled away the time walking in rounds), but it was locked and it made me feel that childhood interdiction all over again. Then we passed by a small restaurant full of quite affluent people, and we felt again we could never belong there. The architecture of the houses all around was so strange and unknown to us. Then the door of your house in Ladbroke Terrace opened, we climbed the stairs and there you were, making everything familiar for us all of a sudden. England was no longer England, but a space where we could breathe. You made England happen for me. Nobody else had that gift.

**RF.** I am touched by your recollection of walking around my neighborhood. I am so glad that you felt at ease in our apartment. I hope you will be there again, and that we shall have many more conversations about poetry.

Januray 3, 2003

## U. A. Fanthorpe, *Poetic arrogance is as bad as any other kind of arrogance*

Interview with **U.A. FANTHORPE** (born 29 July 1929-2009), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** Reading your poems has made me ashamed of my attempt at defining contemporary poets as a group. I always start from the assumption that Desperado poets (as I call them, because I hate the vagueness and indeterminacy of postmodernism) are basically similar in dissimilarity. Yet, more than any of those I have interviewed so far, you stand majestically alone and aloof. I understand you started out as a school teacher and continued as a hospital clerk, after sixteen years of teaching. What exactly pushed you into poetry? What was your education, what were your childhood and youth experiences? In short, would you reveal to the readers as much of your private life as their eyes are allowed to glimpse at?

**U.A. FANTHORPE:** When I began writing, at forty-something, I thought my only advantage over everyone else who's just beginning to write is that I've seen things they haven't all seen. The hospital gave me an angle on life which few others were fortunate enough to have. I didn't want to be like anyone else. My childhood was happy until the war began in 1939; then our parents had to send us (my brother and I) away to school for safety, because Kent – where we lived – was near Biggin Hill, an important airfield regularly targeted by German bombers. I never really settled at the school they sent me to, but I couldn't tell them; they already had enough to worry about.

When I escaped from school I managed to get to Oxford, which suited me much better, and which introduced me to Old and Middle English, which was a delight. I didn't want to stay on at university after I graduated. It seemed to me then an unadventurous thing to do; also I thought it would be better to try and write myself, than write about other writers. I quite liked teaching at first. But after I'd been doing it for some time I was promoted, and I began to see that power had an effect on me that I didn't like.

**LV**. Reading through all the poems, I notice the steadfastness of the theme of death and the shyness of the feeling of love. A critic talked about the dryness in your poems. I do not see it. I can only see a constantly aching sensibility, struggling hard to face life and the idea of the absence of life. Your poetry is buoyantly present, yet deals with absences most of the time. It conveys a sharp, violent pain. How do you see yourself? A happy poet? A melancholy one? A very strong one you are. Is poetry a means of coming to terms with the burden of living?

**UAF**. I'm not really a happy poet, but I try to write happy poems to cheer myself up. This was particularly true in the hospital days. I like adventure: I like wondering what will happen next – and poetry's good for that. You think you know what you're doing, where you're going, but then the poem takes over, and takes you somewhere else entirely.

**LV**. After modernism, the Desperadoes think little of musical lines, flamboyant rhymes, ironical rhymes, rhymes that must absolutely be noticed. The Desperadoes use small, modest, common rhymes, or unusual, uncouth ones (broken words are made to rhyme with some pronoun or preposition). Rhyme has lost its meaning, I should say. The music of your lines comes more from the aptness of words than their rhyming or sonorous rhythm. Your cadence is a forceful inner one, a cadence of meaning rather than sounds. Is the music of poetry important to you? What does it consist in?

**UAF**. I love the music of other people's poetry, and especially the wit. But when I started writing, in the hospital, rhyme just wouldn't do for the very sad subjects. I couldn't be jaunty, in the face of such suffering. My upbringing was not helpful here: the two big influences on me, as a child, were the hymnbook (sanctimonious rhymes) and the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, which have irresistible comic rhymes, and I found myself falling into one or the other of these modes when I attempted rhyme. Neither would do for what I wanted to say. In fact, I couldn't find a model, so I had to find my own way. But the *sound* of a poem is nevertheless very important to me.

**LV**. Many of your poems resort to debunking older texts, sometimes myths. *Not My Best Side* is one such instance. The dragon, the girl and the rescuer from the story of St. George talk in turns and the rescuer comes out as the aggressor. You endow the girl and the dragon with wonderful sensibilities. You do that very often. The least likely to elicit love are in fact the richest in feeling. This earnest irony pervades all your lines. The more prosaic and clearly stated, the more mysterious. Love is your hidden burden. Am I pursuing a wrong line here? Would you be prepared to state that your poems, though apparently refusing to name love, are about caring? It may be a commonplace of poetry (I am aware of that), but so many young poets forget it. You do not. Would you side with someone like Eliot in this respect? What contemporary poets do you feel close to?

**UAF**. No, you're not pursuing a wrong line here – you're absolutely right. I'm interested always in the underdog, the loser. My poems *are* in fact about love, though the message may be oblique. T. S. Eliot is the greatest twentieth-century master, opening up the possibilities. You can never stop learning from him. I feel closest, I suppose, to the Russian Anna Akhmatova, and to the Scottish poet Elma Mitchell, and perhaps to Wendy Cope; of earlier poets, Robert Browning is most important to me.

**LV**. Your poems bathe in a delightful clarity. The uncomplicated style shows enormous respect for communication. The poet in you is in awe of the reader, who must be reached. The latter half of your creation becomes more elliptical in meaning, but the words stay clear. You seem to hate verbal confusion. Some poets hide in it in order to make access to meaning harder and more enticing. Your lines are meaningful above everything else, and you rejoice in this meaningfulness. Have you ever written poems that could hardly be understood? Have you ever been reproached with using a style that bars access to your message? What do you think of the (numerous) poets who do just that (to a more or less commendable purpose)?

**UAF**. Everything you say is true. I do think communication is important – I've been a teacher, and my father was a barrister. Young people find me difficult: these days, they're not educated in the Bible or the classics, and they reproach me for using this material in my poems. It seems to me a great shame to lose such important reference points. A poem is a conversation between the poet and the reader; it's absurd to make things so difficult that you can't be understood – though of course some subjects are difficult, by their very nature, and you can't just reduce them to simple terms.

**LV**. In *Canal: 1977* I have found a line that is emblematic for your poetry as a whole: 'Humanity goes out/ Like a light...' This is what happens to someone you invoke as 'Winfrid Fanthorpe' in the poem *Fanfare*. The irony is melancholy, heavy, affectionate:

> All your life you lived in a minefield,
> And were pleased, in a quiet way, when mines
> Exploded. You never actually said
> *I told you so*, but we could tell you meant it.

Who is this hero, who appears, I think, more than once? How much of your private life goes into your poems? I mean, how much of your private stories? Desperadoes always claim they never use their private narratives in their lines, and I find it to be such a loss. You seem to me to be striking a compromise: I will not share my private incidents, but you can have the support of my feelings in a story or two, you seem to claim.

**UAF**. Winifrid Fanthorpe, whom you rightly describe as a hero, was my mother. I've written quite a lot about her ('Nee', 'Mother Scrubbing the Floor', 'Eating Out') as well as 'Fanfare'. I write less about my father, because he died before I became a poet. I use my private life when it seems appropriate – for instance, about my father in 'Of Worms

and Being Lucky', and 'Father in the Railway Buffet'; my feeling about my parents isn't that I'm sharing them, but I want to *celebrate* them. I feel lucky in having had them.

**LV**. In *A the Ferry* I read: 'I had been born young and lonely, being/ Now loved, and older...' Loneliness is a fear with you. You are very much concerned with the reader not feeling lonely while reading you. Sympathy is one of the major messages of your lines. Some recent poets are contemptuous, others neglectful of the readers, some merely ignore any possible companion, as if poetry could ever be a lonely trip. Your lines cling at companionship. Writing is in fact reaching out, with you. Obviously the idea of poetry has changed immensely these past fifty years. It has become at the same time more personal yet so cold in words, for so many. It is a long winter we are crossing, one might say. Not when reading you, though. Your inner season is tropical summer. The season of your words is one of mild spring, a compromise between the trivially clear and the inaccessible. What is your own idea of poetry?

**UAF**. In 'At the Ferry', writing is 'reaching out' – but it's also reaching out *to myself*, to enable me to understand the things I've endured (I'm rather stupid, and often it takes time for things to become clear to me. Poetry often helps this process.). I don't know what to say about the 'tropical summer' bit, and the compromising between the clear and the inaccessible. I don't want to be inaccessible. But I do want to be truthful. Poetry is the most primitive of all the arts, and one of the best things about it is that it's possible to use ideas, techniques, etc. from very long ago and apply them to now. In England at the moment there's a lot of competition from television, trashy novels and journalism and so forth, but there's a way in which poetry scores when people are feeling strongly about things, when they are in love, or in despair or brokenhearted or afraid or lonely.

**LV**. *Sisyphus* could be interpreted as an image of the poet. Camus says Sisyphus must be imagined to be 'happy', you quote in the motto. In your words, Sisyphus states: 'I accept this/ As my vocation: to do what I cannot do./ The stone and I are// Close.' Later on he continues: 'But I am the mover. I cannot afford/ To spend energy or emotion. I push/ The stone up the hill. At the top// It falls, and I pursue it,/ To heave it up again. Time not spent/ On doing this is squandered time.' Poetry has indeed become the fight with the dragon (read 'explicit emotion'), the heaving of the stone. This stone is the weight of a word which claims to be word before it is something else. You write both this way and the old-fashioned, warmly sympathetic way. Your first poems remind me of Dannie Abse, of William Carlos Williams. In those descriptions of life and death and illness, you did not give a damn whether the discourse looked old or new. In your later poems, you explore language more. What do you think of the contemporary explorations of language and how far in that direction ( of what 'I cannot do') are you prepared to go?

**UAF**. Dannie Abse? William Carlos Williams? I'm pleased that you should think of them!.. But there's an important reservation, in that they were / are doctors, and I was only a receptionist – a lowly but nevertheless specialised role: the receptionist's job is *to watch*. I hardly thought whether I was writing a poem or not; I just wanted to say what I saw.

**LV**. In *The Guide*, you say Vergil 'found ways of wording the unsayable'. He told us:

Hell is a sort of underground bog
... In it
Those we have loved and failed
Turn their backs for ever.

There is this sense of emotional guilt in your poems: you silently accuse yourself of not having been close enough, of not having shared you love enough. Is this the 'unsayable', too? Just how much do you think poetry should reveal? How far has the word strayed from emotion?

**UAF**. 'Emotional guilt'? Uncomfortably accurate! I'm not an admirer of 'confessional' poetry, but I don't think there can be rules about what poetry should or should not reveal. Just when the boundaries have been decided, some brilliant innovator is sure to come along and leap over them.

**LV**. Your lines are unadorned, concentrated, very much to the point. You seem to be interested in apt words, no more. Excess of beauty is repelled. *The Passing of Alfred* turns to death again, but not so much to the cessation of life as to the communication with what could be after it:

> ... the dead followed them, as they do us,
> Tenderly through darkness,
> But fade when we turn to look in the upper air.

An apt word is to you one which has a certain load of inner warmth. Your words become very personal. You recreate them, I should say. You write as if language had to be reinvented all the time. One can feel the difficulty with which you decide upon a word. Do poems come easily to you? Do you take long in putting one down? Do you rewrite a lot? Is creation to you, as Eliot used to say about criticism, 'as inevitable as breathing'?

**UAF**. I'm very interested in the words people use in everyday life, and in how much is *heard* that is not actually *said*. I do decide on a word with difficulty. It's a delight to ransack the language and find – if I do find – exactly the right word. Poems don't come easily. One took me four years. Yes, I do re-write a lot. I'm always *thinking* about what I'm writing about – it's a constant preoccupation.

**LV**. In *Growing Up* you write, 'I wasn't good/ At being a child. I missed/ The innocent age.' Then you say the same about adolescence and adulthood. Your lines exhale a sense of fear. They try to make up for some unnamed failure. Most poets today run away from something, whether it is a sense of loss, of failure, of restlessness, it does not really matter to them. What matters is to find the particular words that will hide that shameful sense as best they can. You are different. You stand naked in front of the eye. You hide nothing. Would it be wrong to say that you are brave in acknowledging your many fears, that your words are apt because they never avoid them? Have you ever thought of poetry as a catharsis of regret?

**UAF**. I think it's important not to run away. I was a child in the 1939-45 war, living – during the school holidays – in a dangerous part of Kent. There was nowhere to escape to, so I suppose I learnt to follow my mother's example: she knew the danger (of bombs etc.) was there all the time, but went on behaving as if things were quite normal. So you're right: I do have fears. I think it's important to admit them. But the most important thing is to survive, and you can't survive if you're eaten up by terror. So I try to find a balance.

**LV**. *Death Row Poets* mentions 'the unrepeatable marvel of each second'. Other texts focus on previous texts, in poems that are both cultured and emotional, because you usually debunk other texts, you do not take anybody's words for granted. Intertextuality began with Eliot and Joyce, but has changed much since then. Your dialogue with written texts others than your own shows bitter irony and a nimble intelligence. It also relies on emotional exploration of well-known literary situations, on modern interpretations of someone like Lady Macbeth, for instance. It all leads to debunking. Although deeply sentimental, your poems are eager to find new thoughts and show old ideas in new shapes. Do you consider yourself an intellectual or an emotional poet? Do you mean to appeal to the soul or the mind? Your poems clearly separate the two and give up none. When you scrutinize your poetic art, in what area of your being do you feel at ease?

**UAF**. About intellectual / emotional: I don't want to be trapped into an either / or situation: I'm on the side of wholeness and integration. I feel at ease when I'm putting both sides. I like to feel the balance in things. (Also, it amuses me, if people conclude that I'm one thing, to pull the rug out from under them and surprise them with the fact that I'm the other...)

**LV**. Whom did you teach for sixteen years? Why did you dislike it so much?

**UAF**. I taught English to girls aged 11-18.

**LV**. What do you think of contemporary criticism, with its scientific aspirations, which stifle creativity and bar understanding?

**UAF**. I hardly read much contemporary criticism. I'm not in the academic world. I'm tempted to mis-quote Shaw: *Those who can, write; those who can't write, write criticism.* But that's a bit harsh. And I do value criticism *by poets*, or at least by those who've tried to write poetry. They know what they're talking about!

**LV**. Which modernist or earlier poets are your favourites? I could hardly trace any influence in your writing. Is there any?

**UAF.** It's impossible to write in English and not to be influenced by Shakespeare. I feel close to the metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell; and two more recent poets I admire are Emily Dickinson and John Berryman.

**LV**. Do you have the feeling that poetry is no longer widely read for a good reason? Because it has changed in the wrong direction? Can you imagine yourself writing in Eliot's or someone else's manner?

**UAF**. I feel that poetry became too hard for the general reader with the Modernists, in the twenties (including Eliot of course). The universities are no help, because they tend to present poetry as something out of reach of the untutored, as something that has to be *explained, decoded.* Nevertheless, as I go round to readings I find there's a very wide public for poetry, not all academics by any means, often very committed. The Liverpool Poets, in the Sixties, won back a lot of readers. And nowadays there's a lot of interest in and enthusiasm for the Caribbeans – John Agard, Grace Nichols and others – and of course Benjamin Zephaniah and many others. Is poetry no longer widely read? It's certainly widely *listened to* these days. And poetry is very adaptable. It finds new places to grow all the time.

**LV**. If you were to start all over again, would you still choose poetry of all arts? Why/ not?

**UAF**. Poetry chose *me.* And I'd go on choosing poetry. There's much more money in other genres, no doubt – but poetry's the thing for me!

**LV**. Is poetic arrogance excusable in your opinion? Do you find it in you to agree with a poet who despises his audience and tries to humiliate them because he thinks he is too good to be understood properly? Because he will not admit it is his fault he cannot communicate? In short, do you approve of the so-called difficult poetry?

**UAF**. I see it as a collaboration between poet and audience. I'm quite certain that any kind of 'humiliation' is absolutely wrong, and poetic arrogance is as bad as any other kind of arrogance.

**LV**. I should say the language of Desperado poetry has been going through a crisis of desacralization. Which is a good thing, as long as it does not go to the other extreme. Your verse does not. Most young poets, though, smash their own golden bowls. Poetry has always been a Henry James kind (a cracked one, I guess) of golden bowl. It has always had a slight imperfection that brought in the charm. What is your imperfection, I wonder?

**UAF**. I'm not absolutely sure that I understand this question. I think that perhaps my 'imperfection' is stupidity, which I use in poems. I'm aware in daily life that the people I meet are more perceptive, braver, and more practical than I am – and out of perversity, I like to celebrate this.

October 2002

## Elaine Feinstein, *My voice finds me when I write*

Interview with **ELAINE FEINSTEIN** (born 24 October 1930), British poet and novelist

**LIDIA VIANU**: Your preface to your *Collected Poems* states that you have the sense of ‘being an outsider’. This is a major trait of what I call Desperado writers, who are never at home, even if they never travel abroad. Your poetry strikes me as a homeless poetry. You need a home but cannot really find it. Not in verse. Your lines are a constant tension and struggle. Does this make you feel part of Postmodernism/Desperado – meaning part of what has been going on in literature since the 1950s?

**ELAINE FEINSTEIN**: I feel at home in London, now, because I have a wide circle of friends, but my generation is aware of a kind of precariousness which (I think) my children largely lack. They have assimilated to British culture and way of life, while I still trail a residual knowledge of that Central European abyss which could easily have been my own. That knowledge used to make me rather impatient with the limited range of concerns of many English poets.

I began to write in the fifties. I was very conscious then of being an outsider but also rather proud of having roots elsewhere. My four grandparents were Russian Jews, who arrived in England at the end of the nineteenth century. The two families were very different. My mother’s father, a glazier, was very successful, and his children went to University, two of them to Cambridge. My father’s family worked in the wood trade, and my grandfather was a scholar, who knew several languages, but was always a hopeless businessman. His affairs were kept afloat by his many children, who had to leave school early to cope. My father left school at twelve. All that side of my family believed God would look after them, while my mother’s brothers were militantly atheists, believing only education could put the world to rights. When I won a Scholarship to Cambridge, I was, I suppose, in the Compton tradition of my mother. But I relished the confident, reckless lives of my father’s family. And I didn’t want to take after my mother, who was a rather timid woman; pretty, but crushed because her rhesus negative blood killed all the children she conceived after me. When I began to write in the fifties, I was very conscious then of being an outsider but also rather proud of having roots elsewhere.

**LV**. *Mother Love* is a poem of Desperado directness. It is boldly personal and rendingly tender. Your tenderness handcuffs you. Most poets today hide their vulnerability. You and Ruth Fainlight parade it and prevail in spite of it.

Your voice is strong in poems. Do you feel feminism would be an option in your case? When I told Ruth Fainlight I did not think she could ever be a feminist, she was upset. She said she was. I do not think you are a feminist either. Is that acceptable to you?

**EF**. There are so many strands of feminism. I am, truly, pre-feminist. In my generation of Cambridge graduates, I was the only woman to go on working after marriage and having children. I have always earned my own living—necessarily, since I do not have the usual domestic virtues, and needed to pay for a cleaner. Working did not make me independent of my husband though, even when I was financially an equal partner. In the Seventies I did find the women's movement very sustaining, notably a group of writers who wrote for Emma Tennant's magazine *Bananas*, such as Angela Carter who was a friend. But most of my novels deal with a struggle for self-esteem which fails because of some pathetic female wish to be part of a loving and bonded couple. My novels are a very important way into understanding me, but if we are to look at the trajectory of my development as a poet, I can see that when I began I was very well aware that I didn't have the right voice for English poetry, and that was why I turned to the Americans, because I enjoyed their rhythms and intonations. I even started my own magazine to introduce poets such as Charles Olson and Denise Levertov to an English audience.

**LV**. You end *Buying a House for Now* with the lines:

I testify
to the beauties
of now only

Your poems create a sense of beautiful in spite of ugliness. Your voice is frail, yet indomitable. You feed on the past, although you proclaim the beauty of now. The Desperado is a writer who is a slave to the past, to his memory and inevitable nostalgia. Would you accept being classified as a Desperado from this point of view?

**EF**. I like the word Desperado, though your definition is new to me. I think the poem you pick out is filled with what Vosnesensky calls 'nostalgia in the present'.

**LV**. There is in your poems the image of a rather absent partner ('I know how/ you want to be rid of us, you were/ never a family man' – *Marriage*), whom you love in a painful way:

we share  this flesh  we
bring together  it hurts to
think of dying as we lie close

Desperadoes as authors have never claimed love might be a major interest. They have pushed it to a small corner of the plot or the poem, yet, at the end of their text, we realize love *is* their main concern. You do not have love poems as proud statements of the feeling, yet all your poems are pervaded by tenderness. There is a Desperado paradox here: you write passionate poems about a discreet exile of the feelings. Do you consider yourself a sentimental poet?

**EF.** I suppose when my husband was alive I did think that love was on the sideline of the main thrust of my interest. Sadly I now admit that was never truly the case. We had a difficult marriage but a very intense one. Indeed, if you look through my *Collected Poems*, you will find many of them do address the difficulties and intensity of that marriage, notably 'Separations', 'Bonds' ' Living Room', and in a humorous way 'Wheelchair'.

**LV**. *Anniversary* ends with:

I shall have to whisper it
into your heart directly: we are all
supernatural  every day
we rise new creatures  cannot be predicted

This amounts to a confession of hope. Your poems are all hopes for affection of one kind or another. What prompts you into writing them? Is it solitude, love, need for communion, desire to confess in an indirect way?

**EF.** That particular poem was written as an anniversary present for my husband.  At its heart, is the knowledge of the difference between science – my husband was a brilliant molecular biologist – and the numinous. apprehension of the world by a poet.  He was always so angry that I imagined scientists look for patterns, when truly they look at evidence, that I stopped reading it in his presence, though it is one of the poems listeners like most. As to the longing for love. No.... The wish to give love.

**LV**. *A Prayer for My Sons* reminds, in title only, of Yeats' *A Prayer for My Daughter*. Desperadoes love rewriting, winking at previous texts. Did you have Yeats in mind when you used that title? You ask your 'bright sons' to forgive

you for having ‘put my fear into you’. This would never have occurred to Yeats to do. It seems to me you delight in differing from him and you do it on purpose. I may be wrong, though. Am I?

**EF.** I confess I did not have Yeats in mind. I was desperately afraid that I had damaged my talented and intelligent children .

**LV**. *I Have Seen Worse Days Turn* ends with another memorable line: ‘How do you change the weather in the blood?’ Desperado poets love to write an apparently blank poem, and then, bang, end it with a rainbow line, like fireworks. You do that all the time. You save the best for last. Is it a conscientious act to end the poem strongly?

**EF.** I try to end all my poems memorably, sometimes even using a rhyme to make the ending stronger. I notice, however, that when writing poetry with American free verse in my ear I made little use of rhyme. After working on my translations of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, I came to value stanzaic form, and used rhyme more frequently, notably in the poems from *Gold* and *Daylight*.

**LV**. *Birthday: a Dark Morning* reminds me of T.S. Eliot’s love seen as ‘the awful daring of a moment’s surrender’ (*The Waste Land*). You call joy ‘that impudence’. Your half-ironic, half-sad line seems to withdraw from Eliot while echoing him. Were Eliot or Yeats among your masters? If not, who was?

**EF**. Ah: of course I loved both Yeats and Eliot, but when I began to write they were the influences who had to be thrown off. I found the Americans – Pound, Stevens, Williams – helped me. And Charles Reznikoff was particularly important to me, particularly in the way he tried to evoke the presence of a single person. Then – see my interview with Michael Schmidt in PNR – it is on my web site – the Russians, particularly Tsvetaeva. I encountered her work in a library, while researching a series of lectures I was giving on rhythm. I found her name in Pasternak’s *Safe Conduct*, and then found she only existed in Russian. So I made versions of her, with the help of Angela Livingstone from the Russian Department of the University of Esssex, at first only for myself. It was a transforming experience. She released me from the constraints of the poetry being written all round me... From the fear of self exposure. From defensive caution. And of course from English irony.

**LV**. *Out of Touch* is one of the sentimental poems, kind of post-Browning in tone:

love
don’t be lonely   don’t let us

always be living singly on

some bleak journey   wait for me:
this   deliberate world   is
rapidly losing its edge.

*Dover Beach* echoes close by. Yet what you write is unmistakably contemporary. There is no retro air to your poems. Your words are tragically up-to-date. Even love is a source of tragedy. If I had to choose between sense of humour and depth to characterize your verse, I would most certainly choose the latter. How would you characterize yourself?

**EF.** English poetry delights in irony as a way of keeping deep feeling at a distance. This is not a sentimental poem – the fears expressed of loss and separation are only too real.

**LV**. One of your poems is entitled like Ruth Fainlight's cycle, *Sybil*. Are you a friend of Ruth Fainlight? You share the same feeling of guilt that is particularly Jewish. You do have a number of similarities, even though your voices are distinct from each other.

**EF.** Yes, Ruth is a friend. She is far more interested in the poet as seer than I am.  Ted Hughes' voice is in the background for both of us.  But I wrote a whole long poem *The Celebrants* ( see particularly the last lyric)  to distance myself from his seductive emphasis on the whole cult of shamanism. Both of us were influenced by Leonard Basin's terrifying bird/sibyls, I suspect. But my work is nothing like Fainlight's.

**LV**. You have a courage that is very much your own, because it survives in the vicinity of fear, frailty, regret. You say 'God punishes regret' (*Regret*). We must do our best and go forward. Is that your philosophy of life? It seems to me you allow nothing to stand in your way, frail and vulnerable as you may seem. There is bravery to helplessness and you certainly have that.

**EF.** We are all vulnerable. It is the human condition.  Now I am a widow I understand the full meaning of mortality.

**LV**. *Photographs* has a line that can be associated with the Desperado sense that the beautiful, brave hero is dead and has been replaced by the ordinary. Actually this started with Modernism, with Virginia Woolf explicitly, but she did not really accomplish what her essay *Modern Fiction* claimed must be done. The Desperadoes get to put into practice what she preached. You write:

‘Oh Daddy,’ I asked once
‘why aren’t I prettier?’ He was kindly but embarrassed.

I have found this admission of the opposite of beauty in poets as different as Alan Brownjohn, Ruth Fainlight, Selima Hill. It conveys far more than ‘She walks in beauty’, in fact. It goes straight to the core of pain in life. Is the pain of life your favorite subject for verse?

**EF.** I think it is. Alan Brownjohn is also a friend, by the way. Very English, but very frank about his own sense of himself. I have to say that while writing the life of Anna Akhmatova I have come to understand that beautiful women have a completely different experience of life. I remember, at the other extreme, that Tsvetaeva wrote: ‘I never counted in the masculine present.’

**LV**. *Homecoming* states: ‘this city music and a few friends keep me sane.’ Actually I did have a feeling of precarious sanity while walking the tight rope of your despair. What is your favorite, courage (as a triumph over fear) or sanity (as a triumph over senseless defeats)?

**EF.** It is only through bravery that you can overcome inevitable defeats. But I know that much of what I have done would have been impossible without the support of friends.

**LV**. I think age comes naturally with you. *Getting Older* states: ‘We all approach the edge of the same blackness/ which for me is silent.’ Youth is not one of your themes, but age is. It was for Yeats, too. In the same sense as it is for you – as a brave confrontation of what cannot be prevented. You have written about your children, but not so much about yourself when young. You seem to have taken youth for granted. You do not regret it. Which means age has its rewards. What I mean is, you are a very stable, well-balanced poet. Does this steadiness really come naturally or did you have to work at it?

**EF**. I found a sense of balance as I grew older... I was very febrile as a young woman. I think I was happier as I grew older, though I suppose I am thinking of my forties when I say that.

**LV**. One more echo, Sylvia Plath, with *Lady Lazarus*, in your ironically different title *Lazarus’ Sister*. Did you meet Sylvia Plath? Ruth Fainlight was friends with her. Were you in their circle? Is this poem a real echo of her poem?

**EF.** I knew Ted Hughes but not Sylvia. (By the way, I have written Ted's biography... do you know it?  It came out in 2001.) No echoes of Plath here. This is a very private poem about nursing someone clinically depressed .

**LV**. *Separations* states clearly one reason of difference between you and your partner (I suppose it is your husband?):

But conversation was what you wanted,
some exchange of thought, while I
needed tenderness more than talk.

It puts the essence of your poetry in a nutshell. You do not write philosophical lines, you capture tenderness. The poetic mood for you is the tender mood. You avoid intellectual dryness, even though your poems are small essays on how to feel. Desperadoes hate the pompous Victorian poetic diction. Do you plan your voice or does it find you when you write?

**EF.** I like what you say here. And yes, my voice finds me when I write.

**LV**. Is it displeasing to you that a reader may look for your life in your poems? *Bed* states:

Now let these words be a loving charm
against the fear of loneliness

I cannot help wondering what the story of your existence is. Like any Desperado poet, you are good at avoiding confession. Why do you think contemporary poets are so unwilling to use biography as plot for poetry?

**EF.** I write novels, and they  rather explicitly make use of my own experience. See *The Border*, *Mother's Girl*, *Loving Brecht* , and *Lady Chatterley's Confession*.

**LV**. In *The First Wriggle* you mention 'a freedom// in which poems could happen.' Is poetry freedom or bondage to you while you write it?

**EF.** Poetry is freedom.

**LV**. In several poems you mention Romania. I guess you must have visited the country and Bucharest. I understand your parents came from Odessa. Do you have any relatives in Romania, too? You have written nothing about Odessa. I remember Carol Rumens' poems about Russia. Have you been there? Is that space of interest to you?

**EF.** I was in Romania on a British Council visit of about a week, a few years ago. I doubt there are any relatives there... I have been to Russia many times, and with Russianist help, translated the poems of several major poets, including Marina Tsvetaeva. (They are in the *Collected Poems*). I've just completed a biography of Akhmatova.

**LV**. I read in *Allegiance:*

my inheritance
— Kovno, Odessa, packing and running away—

But that is all you say. I cannot help thinking of Chagall and his pogrom imagery. Does this might-have-been which you escaped haunt your dreams?

**EF.** Yes.

**LV**. In *Still Life* I find: 'the biology of tenderness is forgotten.' In this world of 'outsiders' (a word you also apply to Roy Fisher in *City Lights*), you say, poets do not 'fit' (*Modern Tower*). This inability to fit or feel at home and sheltered, is typical for Desperadoes. They are the ill-loved. I think you are one of them. Your *Hotel Maimonides, 2* very much resembles Ruth Fainlight's *The English Country Cottage.* You write:

Why are my dreams disturbed
by crossing borders, hiding, stories
of angry peasants...
I have lived in a rare island of peace

As a last question: what race, religion, group of poets and type of poetry do you belong to?

**EF.** I think the emphasis of my *Hotel Maimonides* is VERY different from Fainlight, who is trying to imagine her own fitting in otherwise.

I am a British poet, of Russian Jewish origin. I belong to my family, and to a group of good friends, some novelists, some poets, who live as it happens on several continents as well as locally in NW London. I wrote that poem in Cordova, where I had spent a week, helping a group of poets to translate my poems into Spanish. The situation is totally different there, since Jews have only in the last twenty years or so been allowed to return there. My concern is with the whole Jewish people, and their difficult history under threat.

February 13, 2005

## **Kate Foley, *To would be writers the only advice must be, read, write – and don't be afraid***

Interview with **KATE FOLEY** (born 21 July 1938)

**LIDIA VIANU**: Your poetry is both lyrical and very strongly intellectual. You are an archaeologist by formation, I understand. Your view of the universe is different from that of people who do not put themselves in perspective. You have had an initiation in the immensity of the history of this earth. What is it like, to be at the same time an archaeologist and a poet?
**KATE FOLEY**: Archaeology is both a deeply romantic discipline and a profound corrective to romanticism. From my early childhood I was fascinated by archaeology but my own discipline, archaeological conservation, relied on a forensic approach to reconstruct the stories of everyday, humble objects. So although there was a thrill in handling an object for the first time in hundreds or thousands of years there was also a scientific objectivity; 'this much you can say; no more.' I am, as you say, a lyrical poet but I think I learned a kind of astringency from my scientific training. I hope it has created some necessary gaps and silences in my poetry. The immensities of archaeological and geological time do mean a great deal to me.

**LV**. You live in Amsterdam. Why have you chosen this city as residence? Is it more welcoming than London? Is Dutch culture important to you? Do you speak Dutch?
**KF.** For the simplest of reasons. Aged 59 I fell in love with a Dutch woman and followed her to Amsterdam where we later married, as you can in Amsterdam. And yes, almost everything about Amsterdam is more welcoming than is London. It is a truly international city built on a domestic scale. You can walk everywhere that matters. It's unselfconsciously shabby but beautiful and the cultural life is vibrant while lacking in pretention. I enjoy Dutchness and Dutch culture, not least because of its close affiliation with English culture. There's a robustness of humour and outlook which I find attractive. But I am still struggling with the language. I can do the doctor and the market and the Aunts but the tv goes too fast and because I spend so much time reading and writing in English I still only read Dutch painfully slowly. So I think I will always be a friendly outsider.

**LV**. The same as UA Fanthorpe, RV Bailey, Jeanette Winterson, Nick Drake, you are a gay voice in literature. From the point of view of literary quality, being gay changes nothing. In point of subject matter, it makes you more relevant, deeper, it gives you resonance. Literature welcomes gay voices today as it did in ancient times, but not very often in

between. I find being gay a source of intensity and freshness of perception. What does being gay mean to you, both in point of experience and literary rendering?

**KF.** This is a question I have never seriously asked myself. Why not? I'm not really sure. Being a lesbian is now as comfortable and ordinary as an old, well-worn pair of shoes. I can of course remember when it was far from comfortable, accompanied by guilt, angst, secrecy and the febrile pleasures of leading a double life!

I enjoy the access to queer culture and the tribal aesthetic and I am deeply affected by issues relating to women, including of course lesbian women but am I a 'lesbian writer'? I think not although I am glad to be identified as a lesbian and indeed I often suffer pangs of guilt for not being more overtly political. I never set out to be elliptical or oblique but the only way I can get gay or lesbian issues into my work is obliquely.

Once upon a time I struggled with my sexual orientation. Since then being a lesbian has built itself so deeply into my persona that I almost never think about it. The task, it seems to me, is to be as fully human as possible and where you are placed on the spectrum of sexuality is only one of the issues that people have to grapple with. I want to be identified – 100% so – but not ghettoized.

However, I love other gay and lesbian writers and writing – the whole spectrum from bodice rippers and whodunits through to Adrienne Rich and a raft of other poets.

**LV**. I find you a rather shy poet. Tenderness is well hidden. The history of the world is more obvious. What prompted you into writing poetry? Feeling? Ideas?

**KF.** I hope very much that 'tenderness' isn't too well hidden! I suppose like my politics, it's there but often ambiguous and sometimes diffuse. But it is feelings of tenderness that prompt me into writing most often, whether it's towards people, animals, things or landscapes. For example, in the poem *Milk* which interweaves my mother's life and mine, and uses milk as a metaphor for all she couldn't give her adopted baby, what started out as a poem about my 'lacks' became very much a not un-tender portrait of her. I suppose it's a good example of the power of poetry to confer insight even on its writer. And I absolutely don't mean that this is a 'therapeutic' process. This isn't about the healing that can take place in therapy. It's about selecting, reflecting, ordering, and if you're lucky, making art and making sense.

A reviewer said (to my delight!) that I take personal experience and run with it, further than many poets. I do hope so because for me the only justification for using such personal material is to see it change and re-order itself under the strong lense of reflection.

Ideas are very important to me but it is always a strong lyrical jolt that gets me going.

As to what prompted me to write, it was the heady experience of finding, aged 11, that I could do it!

**LV**. I find what I call Desperado poets quite indifferent to the make up of verse, which is rhyme or sound-matching. Rhythm is all important in your poems. It is a rhythm of the mind and the body at once. What differentiates poetry from prose, in your opinion, nowadays?

**KF.** What do you mean by 'Desperado'? It's a lovely term! Writing is still one of the few things I do purely by instinct – or at least, that's how it begins. Yes, the rhythm sounds in my head and my body and I feel superstitiously that if I manipulate it too consciously I'll lose it. I *am* interested in patterns and forms in so far as they help to express what I want to say. There is also a strong visual element in this but I can't work up an interest in formal verse patterns. I do use half and complete rhymes from time to time but so far not in a specific scheme. The big challenge for me is to undertake the task of revision *without* a formal template to work with, albeit with a very clear inner 'landscape' for the poem.

If I could truly describe what is a prose poem I would also have the right tools to answer your question about the difference between poetry and prose. Pass!

**LV**. You do not write poems based on a script. The idea flows into a mood and then the poem is on its own, having to discover whether it is an act of the mind, the word or the soul. I find your poems are all these put together. Your poetry is a total art. Who were your masters? Who taught you how to write?

**KF.** Everybody has ancestors, don't they? I fell violently in love with Gerard Manley Hopkins aged about 14. He elbowed the romantic poets right out of the way and was a wonderful introduction to the more modern poets I then began to read. Also, when I was still at school, I loved a little known Victorian, Charlotte Mew and later, Eliot, and the Metaphysicals. Now I am deeply attached to Rilke and I also read a lot of American and other English language women's poetry. And I mustn't forget H.D., a recent exploration.

But although I began to write early I didn't publish until very late. For many years I had no mentors, and no literary connections and it was just a question of processing things through 7 stomachs like any other ruminant until it came out right. I never wavered in my belief that I was meant to be a poet but it didn't really occur to me that I could be published.

**LV**. Sometimes contemporary poetry is dry and fails to communicate, although it is never encoded. Any human looks for stories, even when they read poetry. I think the nature of lyricism has changed, The language is no longer declamatory, not at all. Desperado shyness is one thing that keeps Desperado poets together. How do you make a poem intense?

**KF.** By throwing my heart in front of the poem and following it and then by stripping out all exaggeration, anything that is there for effect and seeing if I can live with what is left.

**LV**. Some of your poems are built on your own history, but not much is really clear. It is all veiled in layers of lyricism and images. What is the story of your life? I only know very little.

**KF**. I was born in a London convent, home for unmarried mothers, and adopted soon after by working class parents who acted much against the wishes of their family. My earliest memories are of the bombs and shelters of war time London – a smell of earth, and the beautiful, fiery night sky. Already an avid reader, the introduction to poetry in my fairly brief time as a scholarship girl at the convent grammar school struck very deep roots, which have long outlasted the religion that also came in the package. By the time I was 16 I was in hospital with TB and as soon as I was fit, I started nurse-training, partly in order to leave home.

My working life has included nursing, midwifery, teaching (children and university students) and for 25 or so years, working with archaeological material as a conservator. My last job, as Head of English Heritage's technical and scientific research laboratories, introduced me to such a rich vein of ideas and experiences of the material past that I am still drawing on it in my writing. On the way, I picked up an education, rather late and absolutely non-literary.

I don't see my inner life as being 'veiled' in my poetry. For example the relationship which endured for some 33 years of my adult life and which ended when I came to Amsterdam in 1997 is both mourned and celebrated in the long 'divorce' poem *Night and Other Animals*. I hope the poem is reflective and transformative without being exploitative – but it's a very fine line to tread.

Another emotional landmark for me was receiving three letters from my biological mother, whom I discovered to be living in America, aged 86. Soon I shall be visiting the places where she lived and worked with my newly discovered brother. So here in Amsterdam a whole new family by marriage and in England roots and family to whom I'm biologically related.

I realise this is only a framework but I am very willing to answer any questions you may have. I feel that the richness, conflict, loves, hates and metaphors for my life really are to be found in what I've written. Although I very much hope it is digested and the product of reflection, it is certainly not censored.

**LV**. Is poetry an art of the present? Do you feel part of a community or a singular poet struggling with a hostile literary world?

**KF.** Why do the Americans write so much good poetry? Because they need it! Yes, absolutely poetry is an art of the present.

I don't feel I have a very significant place in the literary community of England. It's growing a bit as I get more reviews, read more, do more workshops but these are occasional benefits. I am glad to be part of the Second Light network, too, but I guess living abroad necessarily means I am semi-detached.

What I do value is my fairly recent membership of an Amsterdam collective, called *wordsinhere*. It produces a yearly, high quality magazine called *versal* . I am a (small) part of the editorial team and I also am about to launch into workshops and other community based activities. I love being plugged in to a group of people –albeit mostly 30-40 years younger –who passionately believe that poetry is of NOW.

**LV**. Your poems have a short fuse, they blow up in the reader's face when least expected. Your language is strangely intense for someone who has never studied literature. But true poets are those with the gift, not the knowledge. What do you advise someone who feels like embarking upon writing poetry today?

**KF.** Yes, I think I know what you mean by a 'short fuse' which is not, however, incompatible with the sustained effort of the long poem. If I am proud of anything I've done it is the sheer concentrated work that went into *The Don't Touch Garden, Night and Other Animals* and *The Bleeding Key.*

To would be writers, the only advice must be read, WRITE – and don't be afraid.

*7 May 2005*

## **John Fowles, *Literature is half imagination and half game***

Interview with **JOHN FOWLES** (31 March 1926 – 2005), British novelist

**LIDIA VIANU**: What is your favourite activity (writing included)?

**JOHN FOWLES**: I think very definitely studying and remembering nature; what we call natural history over here.

**LV**. How do you feel about critics who try to interview you? Do you welcome/ tolerate/ hate attempts at making you explain what should actually be enjoyed and left at that (your work)?

**JF**. I am grateful for their interest. I am certainly not against people like academics (or you) for their just curiosity.

**LV**. What else beside fiction have you written? Poetry? Criticism? Drama?

**JF**. I have tried to write poetry all my life and am indeed hoping to publish a new form I have only very recently evolved. I have written a certain amount of criticism, mostly not yet published. My most important other work concerns a diary I kept through most of my life. I hope that will say what I mean. It should come out next year.

**LV**. What is your opinion on the film made after *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the change in perspective? How do you feel about the film made after *The Collector*, which totally ignores the best part of the book, Miranda's diary, the necessary half of the scales, without which the novel loses its intensity?

**JF**. I did, when younger, study the cinema a good deal, and thought about it. I certainly don't feel it is effortlessly superior, especially in its French and Italian forms.

**LV**. Which do you favour, book or film? What is the future of literature, in your opinion? Will people ever stop reading in favour of the screen?

**JF**. I am highly suspicious of Hollywood and think most of the best cinema in Europe is French, German and Italian.

**LV**. What question would you most like to be asked but have not yet been asked so far?

**JF**. The only question is: Who am I? I've lived 74 years and still don't begin to know.

**LV**. What is it you most hate about interviews? What question is most hateful of all?

**JF**. It's generally the questions that give my ignorance the most scope to extend. Every answer should really begin: 'I don't know, but I suppose...'

**LV**. I have guided dozens of graduation papers on your work at Bucharest University. Do you like the idea or would you like to stay away from academics?

**JF**. I am honoured to have been so popular. Of course I like the idea, above all I try to be European. Academics are obviously very useful and I would hate to deny their potential importance – like you and this letter.

**LV**. If a student came and asked you how your personal life was woven into your novels, what part reality played in your plots, would you tell him the truth?

**JF**. I should try to tell him the truth, but I'm not sure that I could. Knowing who you are and what your faults are is the great problem for all of us writers.

**LV**. How much of your life have you actually put in your books? What has really happened to you out of what you have written? Which novel is most autobiographical, if any?

**JF**. I have tried to fit all my life in. I suppose the most autobiographical book changes in everything I write. I have already mentioned *Mantissa*. I think most writers must use the realities that life has brought them.

**LV**. Is literature confession, imagination, game?

**JF**. I think literature is half imagination and half game. One's feeling alter, sometimes very greatly, from one creation to the next.

**LV**. Is love interest (which Woolf so much hated but could not do without) crucial? You treat it with irony, but your reader usually does not. Do you welcome emotionally involved readers?

**JF**. I wouldn't say that I rely totally on love interest, although I do very much like emotionally involved readers.

**LV**. What is your most ardent wish?

**JF**. To be understood and to teach. I suppose in a way to sell the ethical aspect of my work.

2001

## Leah Fritz, *Home is anywhere you decide it should be*

Interview with **LEAH FRITZ** (born 31 May 1931), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: The same as Ruth Fainlight, you came from New York to London. Two more Americans turned English are Sylvia Plath and Eva Salzman.

**LEAH FRITZ**: And the late Michael Donaghy, among others, though I'm a permanent resident here and not a citizen. Strangely, Eva, Michael and I turned up in London around the same time. I've read with both of them publicly, with Eva at the Barbican Library, with Michael at Lauderdale House. Perhaps what we all had in common was an understanding of New York nuance, quite different from what the British mean when they say 'irony,' but something like a family sense of humour. Like everyone else in the large poetry circle here, we miss Michael who, as I'm sure you know, died suddenly at the age of 50 last year. He was a superb poet who was much loved for his personal qualities of warmth and kindness, as well as for his genius.

**LV**. What does it feel like to live in England after having been born and educated in America? Is society different?

**LF**. Yes, but it depends on where you live in each country as to the kinds of differences you will encounter. Until the 9/11 tragedy, New Yorkers were barely considered citizens of the United States by people in the hinterlands. Then suddenly we were loved, until my compatriots in that city (I was already here, of course) held up signs saying 'not in my name,' in opposition to many of Bush's policies. In Britain there is some anti-American feeling, but poets here generally recognise themselves as belonging to the international nation of poets, which is one of the international nations I belong to.

**LV**. What is your profession? Where do your main interests go?

**LF.** I regard myself as a professional writer, although I don't earn a living from that. I'm also a housewife! My interests are in my work, my family, the world, everything...

**LV**. Is poetry a calling, a refuge, an alternative?

**LF**. It's simply what I do. I don't question it. As it turned out, it became the fulcrum for my social life in Britain, as well.

**LV**. I understand you are involved in politics.

**LF**. I'm not now.

**LV**. How would you define your position in both directions?

**L.F**. I take it, by that question, you mean poetry and politics. In poetry, I have no position.

These days I'm interested in writing formal verse for the most part. I'm not sure why. Perhaps because it adds to the pleasure of writing certain constraints which make it a bit more challenging. After all, I've been writing poems since I was eight years old, so imposing difficulties may be a way of keeping me fascinated with the discipline. But as an admirer of poetry, my taste is definitely eclectic – and some of the best poems I have written, even recently, are in free verse.

In regard to politics, I am a feminist and a pacifist and against all forms of racism – but beyond that I tend to stick to local activism, if at all. I am, frankly, quite disillusioned with the results of past efforts to change the world. The place keeps getting worse and worse. Whatever efforts I do make, I want to have a chance of being effective, and so right now I am struggling against the closing down of a local poetry venue.

**LV**. One of your lines says, 'poets are radioactive.' Do you feel that way? Your poetry is not at all aggressive.

**LF.** Strange you should say that. One reviewer called me 'dangerous.' But radiation isn't actually aggressive, is it? It doesn't *will* the changes it causes; they just happen because of its nature. In that sense, I think the metaphor is apt.

**LV**. But it does betray a fighting awareness. Are you a fighter? If so, what for?

**LF**. I don't relate to the word 'fighting.' I'm a pacifist. But I do believe in verbal persuasion in limited areas, as above.

**LV**. Quite a number of your poems deal with the condition of women 'in a cage'. Could you describe your idea of feminism?

**LF**. I'm fascinated that you've noticed that. I recall using that image once in a very old prose-poem, but where else, I wonder? I wrote a prose book on feminism once. I may not agree now with everything I said then, but it's a good reflection of what I thought in the 1970s – and much of what I still think, surely.

**LV**. One of your poems ends like this:

I am beginning to champion the cause
of apathy.
There is something to be said
for not becoming part of this,
one side or another,
whatever they do to you.
There is something to be said
for not encouraging them.
There is something to remembering
the personal,
for not letting it become
political,
for not becoming a martyr,
not letting yourself be used tomorrow
in another war.
For being so quiet that if you die
they won't know
on either side.
And it won't be in their war,
and it won't be by their doing,
but just what happened anyway.
But just what happened anyway.

Someone who, like me, lived under communism for quite a number of years, would see in these lines a wonderful statement of independent opinion, the refusal to be anybody's pawn.

**LF**. I'm glad you read it that way.

**LV.** What exactly moved you to write this?

**LF**. It was written in the 1980s at the request of *Decoder*, an Italian magazine. The funny thing is, the left-wing magazine objected to my attitude, but printed it anyway. Obviously I felt a keen disillusion with politics.

**LV**. You write about ‘the city I left an ocean ago.’ Any regrets about leaving New York?

**LF**. No.

**LV**. Do you intend to go to live back there?

**LF**. No.

**LV**. A stanza is angrily directed at male poets:

Among the Oxford poets listed in his book,
four are women, 34 men.
He complains in her anthology
60 per cent are women. No apology.

Good point. But there are a lot of women poets in Britain today. Is feminism still a necessary weapon?

**LF**. This is not directed at male poets but at a particular publisher, Oxford University Press. I admire and like many male poets. Again, ‘weapon.’ That’s not what it is. It’s a point of view. From where I stand, the world still looks lopsided in favour of men. Don’t you think so?

**LV**. Another poem states, ‘home is anywhere.’ Which might also mean nowhere. Do you feel at home in English letters?

**LF**. I feel that’s a positive statement. Home is anywhere you decide it should be and you make it home by caring for it. My two daughters have chosen other places to live. The factor of choice, in this instance, is important to me. And ‘nowhere’ is correct, too, as I feel one shouldn’t be ‘caged’ (if you like) in a particular place because you were born

there. That's probably a very American attitude, although one shared by Australians, too, and for that matter, many Britons. Maybe it has to do with speaking a language that is almost universal.

In regard to English letters, the way the English language is spoken/written in the U.S. and in Britain varies as much internally on a regional basis in both countries as it does between the two. I have learned new words and expressions since coming to Britain which I think enrich my writing. Perhaps more important is that, like Eva Salzman, Michael Donaghy and other Americans who have chosen to live and work in Britain, I feel very at home with British poets.

**LV.** Can poetry be a political weapon? It does not seem to be, in your case. Your opinions play second fiddle to lyricism in your poems. Did you intend it to be otherwise?

**LF**. No, I don't see poetry as a weapon. Why should it be? I'm glad you feel my work is lyrical. I want it to sing. When I write prose, I write prose. When I write poems, I write poems. I hope what I'm thinking and feeling gets across, although people are free to make their own interpretations. If they are persuaded toward a point of view they think is implicit in my poems, good. If not, that's o.k., too.

**LV**. If you could start all over again, where would you like to be born and what would you like to do with your life?

**LF**. New York is a good place to be born and grow up. I raised my own children there, and they think so, too. It's zesty and has a lively mix of international flavours. Whatever your ethnic origins, you tend to feel more comfortable where your group exists in numbers and is influential in the community, and at this time no culture is dominant in that city. There is also a saying, 'If you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere.' So you go elsewhere and you're not afraid. That is, you feel you know how to take care of yourself, and you speak your mind freely. If I had had the opportunity, I might have come to Britain sooner, though. It's a softer place – but then, I do live in a quiet patch of London.

If I had my life to live over, I'd probably have more understanding of, and been kinder to, my parents and more sensitive toward my children – but who doesn't wish that in old age? Otherwise, I've spent twenty very happy years here, and I almost feel my life in New York was a kind of preparation for this – but not really. I have very few regrets. I'm amazed I can say this, but it feels true.

January 2005

## John Fuller, *The idea is the great hull that gets you launched*

Interview with **JOHN FULLER** (born 1 January 1937), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** You have one faith in poetry, and that is irony. Would you say that connects or separates you from your contemporaries? Most critics talk about Postmodernism when they deal with poetry after the 1950s. I prefer to state that irony is the major mood of the Desperado, who can be a poet or a novelist, equally. I shall soon define my idea of a Desperado. To begin with, do you subscribe to irony as the essential attitude?

**JOHN FULLER**: It is only Europeans who find English poetry ironic. To the British, the manner feels much more like common decency, ie. not shouting in public. It informs our whole tradition from Dryden to Auden (and after). But the poem itself as an artefact is also by nature 'reserved' in its turn: if the ordinary discourse of feeling is like the cash in your pocket, then literature is like double-entry book-keeping. Poets are the financiers and swindlers of literature, and the poem is only an invention. The great creative idea is nothing like the wage packet of common experience.

But perhaps for me the 'essential attitude' is something more basic even than irony. It is the conviction that a good poem takes some irresolvable complication, worries it to death like a dog with a bone, and leaves it still unresolved. The pleasure of the poem lies entirely in the worrying, the verbal growling and play. Life itself stubbornly remains entirely like a bone.

**LV**. Your poems are, all in all, a demonstration in earnest of how to take everything lightly, experience of life and poetry included. Your mask is that of comedy, but it hides so much psychological insight and so many stories that cling to life. Is poetry a game for you? Is rhyme a challenge or just a teasing device?

**JF**. Games are as serious as poems are unserious. Nobody quite believes either of these propositions, but the activities are really very close. I have had heart-thumping dreams in which my emotional life was played out as a kind of abstract drama with pieces, like a de Chirico, indeed like chess. The imagery of much modern art implicitly requires its own rules of interpretation. Some of the best computer games are moving inexorably towards the state of interinvolving fiction, where the notions 'reader' and 'player' are blurred (e.g. The moral choice at the end of *Myst*, where the player, who is already in the story, plays a crucial part in his or her own ending). We need this imagined secondary activity. We know it works for us. We mustn't pretend that it serves us directly in life itself.

The question about rhyme is a red-herring: all poetry needs a metric of some kind, and rhyme may be (as one wishes or not) an aspect of the metric. Milton fought against it in epic poetry over 300 years ago. I have written whole

collections of poetry without rhyme. But the sort of thing that rhyme does can still be done afresh. It doesn't have to tease. It is functional. And it can be beautiful.

**LV**. Most poets wail or grin. You do neither. You debunk. Whenever a mood is in sight and menaces the poem to take hold of the lines, you debunk it. This is, to my mind, a very Desperado feature, and one which you illustrate in perfect form, which is really rare. You are a consistent debunker. Which would you say your favorite poetic mood was?

**JF**. The commonest poetic moods for many English poets is the philosophical. But it is a great danger. It was crucially a fatal temptation in the 19th century in this country. Its danger obsessed Keats. Hallam warned Tennyson against it. In some ways it ground Arnold to a halt. Auden fell into it when he was being (as he called it) 'woozy'. But some lyric poets exploit it wonderfully: Wordsworth, Hardy, Housman. I would like to think that the philosophical mood was still possible without being either obvious or sententious, and in more recent collections like *The Grey among the Green* or *Stones and Fires* I am aware of attempting this. 'Debunking' sounds very cynical. I think maybe one sub-mode of the philosophical for me is something to do with wistful acceptance.

**LV**. History is your major refuge. Whenever you need action, you sink into earlier centuries, and there, surprise, you find contemporary vices. The trick is not new, yet your mood is. Shakespeare did not mock at his sources. You are a Desperado, so you take more liberties. You cherish a good subject for poetic gossip, you worship mockery, you flirt with sympathy all along. Conflictual creation is another Desperado feature. Do you recognize yourself in this description or am I putting words in your mouth?

**JF**. I'm at a loss here. I don't know what 'conflictual creation' means. I really don't believe that I mock my sources. Nor do I shirk contemporary vices. To kill both these points with one statement: the longest poem I have written, *The Illusionists*, is an admiring tribute to the Russian poet whose invented stanza I borrowed (Pushkin), and also has a contemporary setting (involving Middle-Eastern oil crooks, art-forgery, transvestism, etc).

**LV**. A Desperado means to look tough. Or, in other words, ironical. A poem like *Alex at the Barber's* betrays you, showing us how tenderness can peep from behind the grin or just smile. Do you see yourself as a sensitive or biting poet?

**JF**. I hope that I am a writer of many moods, many of them invented or ventriloquised in poems that are fictions (or in my novels and stories, for that matter). I have certainly never thought of appearing to be tough in my own voice.

Now look, I am having trouble with your idea of the 'Desperado', since I understand the word to mean the reckless outlaw in Westerns, the renegado who (usually with a small team of unshaven cronies) has to be defeated at the end of the film by the lonely or abandoned lawman in the vacated streets of the town. It seems to me that the writer in this symbolic scenario is much more like the mildly drunk newspaper proprietor or bar-tender of the town, a shrewd commentator perhaps, but someone who keeps his head down when the shooting starts.

**LV**. I detect traces of Joyce (*Dubliners* and not only), Yeats, Byron in your poems. Not many influences can be pinpointed. What poets could be said to be your models? What contemporary poets do you feel you belong with?

**JF**. Eliot, Graves, Auden, Stevens were predictable early influences. Milton, Marvell, Pope, Byron, Browning, Clough rather later. Loads of others, of course. This is the sort of question that is hard to be particular about without simply being listy and boring. But very often for me it is a poem not a poet that becomes a 'model', like the Burns Stanza or the stanza that Wordsworth invented for *Peter Bell*.

**LV**. In my image of one, a Desperado is that writer who is similar to the other Desperado writers precisely by his obvious dissimilarity. A Desperado wants to be, or is involuntarily unlike everybody else, and hates being grouped, defined, questioned, understood theoretically. Most interviews so far have been rather grumbling. Do you like/ dislike/ hate interviews?

**JF**. A critic or a literary historian can always create a group for the most unclubbable of poets. It depends upon the critical or historical point being made. And I would guess that you are right in implying that most poets hate the idea of being so grouped. They would each like to believe that they are unique. Poetry isn't a team game, where poets sit glumly on the reserve benches until the manager gives them a chance. Critics like to be managers. That's what they do. But the poets are simply playing their own game all the time. I don't mind interviews at all, because it isn't like being interviewed for a job. My game will go on, whatever gets said.

**LV**. One of your lines asks, 'unteach me language'. That is what you do to your readers: you unteach them poetry. You argue with all their expectations. You are the jester and the X-ray man at the same time. You see through both life and art. What is most dear to your soul, the one element you do not toy with?

**JF**. The toy is a model of reality that helps the child to learn how to deal with that reality. To a great extent, therefore, poetry acts in the same way by allowing one to play constructively, learning through pleasure. And there must be pleasure in reading about the most difficult or painful things. So 'toying' doesn't contradict the compulsiveness of the

eternal problems we all experience and have to face. Indeed, having to face the unfaceable is something that poets are particularly conscious of, I think. We must try to understand it. Though it would be absurd to imagine that we could or should 'see through' it. Our creaturely condition and all the physical and temporal constraints upon that condition are not things that can suddenly be exposed, like a conjuror's trick. I suppose all this is at bottom a stoic philosophy.

**LV**. Some Desperado poets are either confessive (mostly women, and then they excel at being their sensuous, sensitive, captivating selves) or, quite the reverse, shut tight, rejecting shared emotion, hiding behind the game of words. It seems to me you are the only one so far who manages to do both. Your face is both smiling and affectionate. What do you expect from your reader, how would you like to be perceived?

**JF**. I don't particularly have any ambition to be 'perceived' as a personality in my own work. The process that looks, in your terms, like 'confessing' or 'hiding' is a complex business of distilling and dramatising one's experience of life. This process is much clearer in novels. Looking back on my own, I can see that there is at times a deliberate choice of an inactive hero, whose weaknesses are exposed by the painful things that happen to him (the Abbot in *Flying to Nowhere*, Hugh in *Tell It Me Again*, or Rudolf, Romuald and Radim in *Look Twice*) but equally I have been interested in the hero who simply endures in adversity (Burroughs in *The Burning Boys*, Grete in *Look Twice*, Mair in *A Skin Diary*, or Letty in *The Memoirs of Laetitia Horsepole*). I expect it is significant that most of these are women. Grete and Letty are positively feisty.

Now this is true of the poems as well. Contrast my chess-players in 'The Most Difficult Position' with Annie in 'Annie Upside Down' for example. Many of the voices in the poems are less obviously fictional or dramatic than this, but are not directly mine, nevertheless. I was very conscious of the example of Browning in the 1970s. And I have since then gone on writing poems that are more like fantastical short stories. Some of my short-stories (in *The Worm and the Star*) conversely have many of the characteristics of my poems.

Even the poems in my 'own' voice, like the *Epistles* or some of the longer meditations of the last fifteen years, are public in an 18$^{th}$ century sense or are dramatised (like 'The College Ghost'). Some shorter lyrics here and there are in an intimate and personal voice, I grant. Usually these are written for the particular eye of another, person to person.

**LV**. You teach English literature, I think. What is the age you specialize in and does it bear any influence on your poems?

**JF**. I specialized in early 18$^{th}$ century literature as a graduate, and have written or lectured on poets of that period such as King, Pope, Gay, Philips and Prior. Prior was the dedicatee of *The Illusionists* and his influence can, I'm sure, be detected there. I wrote, but never published, a long Dunciad-like poem in the mid-1960s. For the last thirty years I have

been much more concerned with teaching 19th and 20th century literature. I don't think that the fact of teaching authors of this period (as opposed to simply reading them, I mean) has had much influence, though I was late coming to an extensive reading of Browning, and this was in response to the syllabus.

However, one always wants to recommend to the young the writers one *particularly* likes, and they in turn can communicate their own fresh enthusiasms, so that there may be a complex of reciprocal influences. Quite often one pursues some line of reading, either for teaching purposes or not, and it suggests some way of proceeding in one's own writing. I might never have read Gautier without Eliot's interest in him. A pupil of mine reminded me about Meredith. I was compelled to lecture on Shelley when a young lecturer at Manchester, and without that sort of basis I doubt that I would have been able to introduce him into *Laetitia Horsepole* and write those 'missing' bits of 'The Witch of Atlas'. A fierce kind of 'catching-up' reading of Henry James clearly influenced me in *Tell It Me Again*, useful for the American setting. And so on, and so on.

**LV**. For the readers who do not know you, could you sketch your biography (birth date, education, profession)?

**JF**. I was born on 1 January 1937 in Kent, where my father was working as a solicitor. I largely lived with my mother at her own mother's house in Blackpool during the war (some of my life there is used in *The Burning Boys*). My father achieved his first real reputation as a writer with his war poetry. I was, of course, aware of his literary life from early on, and when I started to write myself, contrived various ploys of self-protective independence. His attitude was perfect: no indulgence, but plenty of technical advice. He died in 1991, and I have much missed the typescripts of my books passing under his friendly but strict eye. He would always say if he disliked what I was up to (some of the weirder surrealist fantasies of my youth, or my sententiousness, for example). I did the same for him, and I believe that he found it useful.

I went to St. Paul's School in London. Although I boarded it, it was largely a day-school, and for that reason relatively relaxed and civilized. I spent a lot of time making films as well as writing. Throughout my two years in the RAF I was still keen on making films, although I had a book of poems ready in the late 1950s. Luckily it didn't get published until it (and I) had matured a bit. I read English under John Bayley at New College, Oxford, and edited the plays of John Gay as a graduate. I married in 1960 (and am very happily married still, with three daughters and two grandsons), published the collection of poems in 1961, and got my first job, as Visiting Lecturer at the State University of New York at Buffalo, in 1962. I helped Ian Hamilton to start *The Review* at that time (I had edited *Isis* at Oxford, and had long contemplated a magazine). Something of the entrepreneurial side of the literary life had always fascinated me: in 1968 my wife and I started a private press with an old treadle printing press that had been used for printing the cricket scores in the Oxford University Parks. The Sycamore Press lasted for 25 years, publishing the first work of

young poets like James Fenton as well as interesting obscurities from older poets (including Auden's ballad 'Sue' and Larkin's rare version of Baudelaire).

By this time I had spent three years teaching in Frank Kermode's department at Manchester, and had a fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford, from 1966. I have been there ever since, and retire this year. As a tutor, I have always tried to encourage students who were writers. During these 35 years I have written poetry, novels, short stories, texts for music, children's books, and academic books. I have also been active as an editor. I am a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature. I have won, amongst others, the Whitbread Prize and the Forward Prize, and have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The only other biographical circumstance that may be relevant is that since 1969 we have spent a good deal of time in our cottage near Llanaelhaearn in North Wales, and I have done much writing there. I am a keen, though very modest, player of correspondence chess, and as well as playing in the BCCA each year I have enjoyed games with other writers such as the novelists William Golding and David Benedictus, the journalist Anthony Curtis and the poet Harold Massingham. My longest struggles are with the retired Magdalen Physics Tutor, Dirk ter Haar. I play the piano persistently but badly, and consider music the senior and supreme art. One of my daughters is a lecturer in music at the University of Reading, the second is the first violinist of the Duke String Quartet, and the third is an artist and playwright, but all three play the instruments of their girlhood (flute, violin and violin) and we have sessions with friends at Christmas.

**LV**. How much of your family life leaks into your poems? Do you believe in showing the reader intimate feelings?

**JF**. I think I have really answered this question earlier. 'Leaking' is an interesting notion. You certainly can't keep life in a water-tight compartment. The poems in *Waiting for the Music* are perhaps relevant examples. They are 'about' persistence; their occasions are musical; but family life certainly leaks into them. I trust that sogginess is, however, not detectable.

**LV**. Your novel, *The Memoirs of Laetitia Horsepole, by Herself*, is inhabited by the same mocking elf as your poems. You love masks. A poet got very angry with me when I said this. Fact is that for the Desperado poet each poem is a new mask. The Desperado needs to baffle his reader and you do that while charming him off his feet. If questioned by a novice in poetry, what would you point as a key to good writing?

**JF**. Masks: of course. We all still write in the shadow of Browning, Yeats, Pound and Eliot. But 'mask' is perhaps an unfortunate translation of the 'persona', because it suggests the evasive (the burglar) or the frivolous (the masquerade). It isn't either of those. It is fruitful impersonation, a testing of the self by imagining another. The best masks are very

close in some crucial respect to the writers wearing them. Choosing a mask is a difficult thing, because it is largely intuitive, and always a risk.

Charming, yes, as in casting spells. Baffling, perhaps, since as Mallarmé famously said, poetry is three-quarters puzzle. I always say to beginning poets that the thing is to have a good idea. The idea is the great hull that gets you launched: everything else (the cargo; the route; paint, sails and flags) comes next.

2001

## Alasdair Gray, *I have never wanted to confuse readers*

Interview with **ALASDAIR GRAY** (born 1934), Scottish novelist

**LIDIA VIANU:** You write as you paint, forcefully. Your imagination compels your readers to forget everything and inhabit your world, unwilling to leave it when the novel is over. Do you feel any kinship with William Blake in the way you associate your gift with the desire of unlimited power over other minds? One of your heroes (Duncan Thaw) actually states he wants this.

**ALASDAIR GRAY**: I've loved Blake's work from the age of 13 or 14. I do not want unlimited power over other minds. I want the limited power of entertaining them. I would not – if I could – force people to read my books in schools or universities. That would make too many bright students hate them. Thaw was an unhappy adolescent, so liable to fascist fantasies.

**LV**. Your first novel, *Lanark* (1981), turns the nightmare into overwhelming joy of life, dystopia into the most desirable of worlds. Was it your intention to shock or to charm? Fact is that you succeed both ways, which is really rare.

**AG**. A long story cannot hold a reader if it lacks surprising developments. Shakespeare, Dickens and Dostoevsky keep providing them. Raymond Chandler advised crime writers, if their plot had become predictable, to have a stranger with a gun burst in through a door. Of course if the surprise is too disgusting for most readers they'll stop reading. When writing the pornographic parts of *1982 Janine* I was deliberately shocking myself. Though I think it my best novel, I cannot now reread it – I'm back to being as old fashioned as I was before imagining it.

**LV**. The starting point of intensity in your novels is either death itself or a lethargy that precedes it. The exit of the novels, on the other hand, is a final victory over and above death, into a mood of jubilation. Love of life is stronger than the dark colours and images you use. You have described the death of death. Would you describe yourself as a utopic or dystopic writer?

**AG**. I don't like describing myself at all, nor do I like describing my books. That is the critics' job. I like how you describe my work, but any other favourable description would please me.

**LV**. One major feature of the Desperado writers is the imperious requirement that their books must be reread in order to be properly grasped. Rereading enhances the enjoyment of the carefully confusing text. Nothing is clarified, but everything is experienced. The end is more than an explanation, it is a shared experience of the unuttered. Do you expect the reader to approach your novels as puzzles or do you think of yourself as a clear writer of hard facts?

**AG.** The only puzzle novels I know are whodunnit crime stories, and if the characters and setting are of interest, the solution at the end always spoils the book for me. Life has no simple, single answer or solution to its problems. Only the crudest religious or political propaganda suggests otherwise.

**LV**. Loneliness is the one common feature of all your characters. Not tragic but reflexive loneliness. Your sensibility is always in hiding. What do you expect from your readers? To respect your isolation (which is only apparent, since the author's love of life pervades even the most terrible tragedies) and give up probing, or to unveil your hidden compassion, which you hate to make visible?

**AG**. I try to remove my ego or personality from my books by splitting it between all the characters, though Duncan Thaw was given more of it than others. When writing in the third person I aim for a quiet, unemotional voice, whether describing what I think comic or pitiable. These events are sometimes both, and wise authors do not tell readers what they *ought* to feel about what their fiction describes.

**LV**. You are a realist but you also come close to science fiction, to dark projections of fears into the future. Actually, your unsparing realism enhances dystopia to a strength of imagination that Orwell and Huxley could not afford. What matters most to you? This undefeated imagination which creates a new world, or the statement of a warning against a dark future for mankind?

**AG**. Nothing you find in my stories seems to me more important than anything else you find.

**LV**. Is style important to you? You create new words (such as *Unthank*, *Provan, Lanark*). I could anagramate *Lanark* into *carnal*, which would make your imaginary world burst with physicality. On the other hand, novels like *1982 Janine* start with physicality and lead to fantasy. Do you set great store on the word as such, in this process of switching from body to word?

**AG**. The names you mention are names of places in or near Glasgow. I enjoy enriching a text with suggestive names found in Scotland or in foreign literature. But my prose (with the exception of *Logopandocy*) mostly depends on short simple words.

**LV**. Another Desperado feature of your novels is their *alogicality*, if I may call it that. You do not defy logic, you simply ignore it and create your own rules for the narrative, the same as your novels create their own order of overwhelming details. What is the main thread of your beliefs, the golden rule of your imaginary world, of your ignoring logic, commonsense, common expectations?

**AG**. The main rule of my narratives is to put convincing people into realistic or fabulous situations and show how they deal with them. Most of my people act very sensibly, I think, however odd their circumstances.

**LV**. You are deeply in love with your text as you write, and the reader is educated to love the ugly side of reality. You create a new sensibility, you devise an alchemy which changes whatever is fear, loneliness and darkness into a desirable fate. When T.S. Eliot and James Joyce started the stream of consciousness, this was their major discovery, but you take it much further. The Desperado no longer fears dystopia, he inhabits it with delight. In view of this description, do you think you could be considered a Desperado (my way of avoiding the term Postmodern)?

**AG**. Emerson said many people’s lives were lives of quiet desperation. Certainly Jack McLeishe’s is. But Thaw only finally despairs at the end of Book 2 and Lanark never really – his prayer to get out is answered. If a Desperado is someone driven by despair then I may be one, because my art is a way of avoiding it. I don’t mind being called one, though most folk think me cheery and harmless. (But most folk are saved from despair by their work.)

**LV**. What you write is, on the whole, a dystopia of old age. Your most desperate images of ‘dragonhide’ are actually the tenderest description of a body growing old. You use harsh words and terrifying images, but they all hide a more than vulnerable tenderness. Lanark shouts, ‘I want out!’ You shout that, too, when you part with both realism and innovation, in order to join the Desperadoes. Where would you place yourself in the contemporary literary landscape, where do you feel you belong?

**AG**. Dragonhide is (I thought) an exaggeration of eczema I had when an infant and adolescent. The chapters describing it in *Lanark* were written when I was 34 or 35, though I was 45 when the book was published.

The writers I feel closest to who still live are Kurt Vonnegut, Gunter Grass and Marquez.

**LV**. You are a compulsive painter and a compulsive writer, and your heroes are compulsive ageing creatures. In the process, they fall prey to bitter emotions, which they experience willingly. Do you deliberately enjoy confusing, then subjecting your readers? Do you mean your novel to be a puzzle that the reader will reshuffle till the final image emerges? Is this your attempt at imagining the unimaginable?

**AG**. I have never wanted to confuse readers: only to interest and surprise them. I can only do that if I interest and surprise myself first. I assume that emotionally I am like most people, though not identical with them, so I can never know exactly how I entertain them.

**LV**. *Lanark* could be associated with quite a number of books: Orwell's *1984*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Kafka's *Trial*, as well as with books by Sartre (the feeling of *nausea*), Wells (free flight of the imagination), Swift (see the *Houynhnms*), T.S. Eliot (the end notes). The Desperado novel feeds on literature. The Desperado spirit is an exacerbated awareness of past texts. You frustrate the readers' sentimentality, but gratify their literary 'dragonhide', their love of the *deja vu*. You work magic with your emotions and words. Are you aware of your dominion of your readers? How do you usually plan to relate to them?

**AG**. I cannot know what power my stories have over readers because many react differently to them, even while being entertained. Others find them repulsive or pointless. But your question suggests a more hectic creative process than I am usually aware of. When a new idea dawned for a book I used to note it down and, sometimes years later, set out to make something public out of it – usually a short story or a play. Some of these swelled into novels because they stimulated or attracted other ideas that seemed surprising yet natural parts of them. The thought that the work was becoming astonishingly bigger was exciting; but ensuring smooth transitions, keeping the parts convincingly together, needed a lot of steady work which I found soothing because I could forget my SELF when doing it: just as a musician would play very badly if he mostly thought of how he seemed to the audience, instead of the sounds he made.

**LV**. Your novels are a crucial reading experience, they change the reader. When you end *Lanark* with the poignant 'Goodbye', the reader feels he has to go back and reread everything in a better way, since he knows better now. That means you change the whole idea of reading. Your road takes the reader from the appalling to the enthralling side of one and the same experience. His very power to articulate or understand what is articulated is placed under a huge question mark. Why do you never answer that question at the core of your literature? Would you accept the statement that you reject explanations because you are an enigmatic Desperado at heart?

**AG**. I do not know of any question at the core of my literature, though many people in them ask or answer questions. Lanark wants to know what he should do with his life – Sludden, Munro, Ozenfant, Noakes and some others give answers he mostly accepts, but not for long. Only folk with perfect faith in one god or one political system believe that they have the answer to every great question. I have not. So what (apart from pleasure) would I like my work to convey? Chekhov said his works were meant to say, 'My friends, you should not live like this.' If my writing has a deep meaning it cannot be deeper than *that*.

I fear that my replies to *your* questions show me similar to most authors. My Scottish writer friends (I have many) find me talkative, cheerful and not at all enigmatic. Like me they are Socialists who grew up with no faith in the USSR and USA governments, because we think single party dictatorships and uncontrolled capitalism undemocratic and corrupt. Like me too they are not members of churches yet have no strong anti-religious prejudice, though religious and racial prejudice, alas, exists in Scotland. The new Scots parliament, however, seems free of it so we can hope.

I admire Vonnegut, Grass and Marquez for their ability to handle mundane and fabulous modes often, but not always, in the same book. I find *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* in some ways greater than *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.

November 7, 2000

**Robert Hampson,** ***There has to be a concern for the reader – something more than blinding the reader with one's obscurity***

Two interviews with **ROBERT HAMPSON** (born 26 November 1948), British literary critic, academic and poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** You are a Professor of Modern Literature and Head of the English Department at Royal Holloway, London. What does it feel like to be an academic today?

**ROBERT HAMPSON:** As Head of a large department at a research-led institution in the highly-bureaucratised British system, I spend a lot of my time on administration – overseeing the various BA and MA programmes, organizing workloads, monitoring the teaching and examination results in the various programmes, writing overview reports and business plans and financial plans … and trying to keep up with the changing legal frameworks (Health & Safety, Freedom of Information etc.) in order to ensure compliance, while also preparing my Department for the Research Assessment Exercise, by monitoring individual research and encouraging larger research bids and projects. I am lucky to have extremely good colleagues, conscientious about teaching and working on a range of intellectually exciting projects. I have a reduced teaching load – a third-year Conrad class; MA classes in Conrad and contemporary poetry; and a number of research students. My third-year students have always been a wonderful group to teach: the course requires them to work very hard, but they rise to the challenge – and get a lot out of it. I have also been excited by the development of creative writing in the Department, which began with Poetic Practice as a third-year course and then as an MA (taught by Redell Olsen), and we have now set up a joint degree in English and Creative Writing, an MA in Creative Writing (taught by Andrew Motion, Jo Shapcott and Susanna Jones), and practice-based PhDs. I have also managed to maintain my own research partly through the supportive research environment in the Department and partly through my involvement in international networks relating to Conrad, Ford and James – and contemporary poetry.

**LV**. Your criticism focuses on Joseph Conrad – who was the subject of my diploma paper, so we share, I think, a biassed love for him – but you also write about Joyce, Ford Madox Ford and Rudyard Kipling, and you have supervised dissertations on Henry James. When you write your critical essays, do you mainly converse with other critics or do you primarily convey your own opinion on the text in question?

**RH.** Apart from editing *King Solomon's Mines* for Penguin, my research at the moment has two foci: Conrad and contemporary poetry. I am engaged on a couple of Conrad projects – one of them a book called *Conrad's Secrets*; a second project on Conrad and space, and a co-edited set of essays on Conrad and Magazine Culture. I am also co-editing a volume of essays on the poet Allen Fisher. In the Conrad work, I develop my own views of the texts through dialogue with other critics. So much valuable and interesting work has been done on Conrad that can't be ignored, and the dialogue through critical writing is just an extension of the dialogue that exists within the community … that carries on through conferences and so on. In my critical work on Allen Fisher and on contemporary poetry and poetics, I am really in conversation with other poets rather than critics.

**LV**. There is much talk these days about criticism having to make itself useful by invading theory, sociology, aesthetics, ethics, philosophy, etc. There is a spreading opinion (born with the European Community) that a discipline must be useful to real life or it should not exist. Utilitarianism redivivus. Does criticism talk about the quality of life? About a recipe for success, the media, other fields? Does it theoretize the facts of the work into a system? The American dream (quick fame and money, no matter how you get them) is surreptitiously taking over. Literature is – I am afraid – being forgotten in the process of conforming to a jargon of newly created – otherwise welcome and very interesting – terms. The more new concocts you use, the less intelligible, the more splendid. The best text is the text which leaves you mute – you cannot comment upon it because you feel you do not want to take the time to learn the jargon. The academic jargon is killing the pleasure of reading a critical text. Where do you think criticism is heading? Is it so changed as to forget all about the literary work and deal more with the theory on life that swallows it?

**RH.** I think there are two separate issues here. In the first place, there is the issue of criticism using various kinds of theoretical language. I am entirely sympathetic to this development in criticism over the last thirty/forty years. I have grown up with this, and I am old enough to remember the former criticism with its unexamined assumptions and unarticulated values. My critical work on Conrad has been influenced by ideas from psychology, feminism, postcolonialism, cultural geography – and these have formed the bases for particular projects. At the same time, I am very concerned that critical work returns to the text and close reading of the text. What I am critical of is where the text is merely fed mechanically through a theoretical model – or where pretences are being made to a reading which hasn't been undertaken (so that references are made to Hegel and Heidegger, for example, without any effort to engage with the work) – or where the critical work moves from one theorist to another without any sense of possible conflicts between theoretical paradigms. Otherwise, theoretical approaches merely add to (and enrich) models of reading.

The other issue is that of utilitarianism. This, I think, is a serious problem and a threat to what literature represents. There is increasing pressure from the government to turn education into training – and to shift universities away from the transmission of knowledge to skills. To go with this, students are being encouraged to regard education

purely instrumentally – as a matter of passing examinations and gaining qualifications for the job market. Ideas of curiosity, creativity, and pleasure – which are of central importance to me both academically and in life – are excluded from this programme. You can also see why governments don't want to encourage the development of informed, critical intelligence – which I still think is an essential part of our larger social role as university teachers and public intellectuals.

**LV**. I am mostly talking about academic criticism, because I am afraid that students and professors are the most stable audience of a critic these days. One reads criticism to study or to compare/conform. It is useful and necessary to confront other opinions and learn from many minds, whether critics or philosophers, scientists. Any text which can force your intellectual limits and enrich your judgment is a blessing. My question does not start from a denial of texts other than text analysis; quite the reverse. I welcome broad minded critics. Contemporary academic criticism is losing its readership. Its audience is smaller and more specialized every day. Is that as it should be? Should we allow it to leave literature and join 'science'? Will we, in the near future, have to learn a new language in order to understand a critical text? What do you think about the way a literary critic should use language?

**RH.** Given changes in the surrounding culture – not least, changes in publishing and bookselling and, in this country anyway, changes in the way people spend their leisure time – it is not surprising that academic criticism should be a relatively small, specialized field, where academic talks to academic. It is hard for us to break out of this, given that newspapers and other media are more interested in sport, fashion, and popular music than in literature and intellectual ideas. New Labour's mantra of 'elitism' has also worked to strengthen the strongly anti-intellectual tendencies in this culture and to discourage ideas of informed intellectual debate. However, I think it is important that we try to break out, that we try to find a public role for academics, intellectuals, writers – and, to do that, we need to be as clear and intelligible as possible, without sacrificing necessary complexities.

**LV**. Students are quite confused in the philological departments of present day universities. If they do not use the jargon, their papers may get a bad grade. If they use it, there are two possibilities: either they use it intelligently (and are understood) or they use it mechanically (combining portmanteau sacred terms and hiding their lack of personal ideas behind them). In both cases, they are very likely to get a good grade. As a professor, you may be put off by a foreign language in a student's essay and imagine he does have something to say. I think that good professors must ask their students to change jargon into intelligent, accessible critical discourse. Must the language of criticism become specialized to the point of departing from the path of a common instrument of communicating an idea about a work (of decoding a text which is already coded – with another convention, true – not further encoding it into newspeak)?

**RH.** As I suggested above, I am sympathetic to the intelligent and intelligible use of theoretical language, but I also share your critical view of the mechanical production of theoretical language. What is important is that students learn to think critically and independently. This doesn't rule out the use of theory, but the marshalling of theoretical terms and allusions to unread philosophers are valueless. I try to train students to think about, question, and support any statement they wish to make. I also try to insist that students should have read widely in an author before they start making generalizations about him/her. If you have read only 'Heart of Darkness', you can't generalize about Conrad. Similarly, if you have read only Freud's essay on the Uncanny, you can't pretend to understand Freud.

**LV**. Is the growing abyss between academic and non-academic criticism (merely a matter of audience, after all) a good thing? Should we feed students only dry jargon and keep for the stray reader the real charm of the critical discourse? Do you teach your students to comply with the arduous terminology (parroting words invented by gurus) in order to get a good grade? As a professor, do you grade the method/jargon or the personal reaction to both? When personal reaction comes without the method, how do you correct the approach? How much of the student's enthusiasm for the work are you willing to sacrifice to the method? Is the method unaccompanied by feeling for the text satisfactory?

**RH.** Within the academy, I certainly wouldn't want my students to parrot anybody's words. I would expect them to come to terms with contemporary critical and theoretical discourse, to have an understanding of both and be able to use various discourses or a particular critical/theoretical discourse in their own essays. A personal reaction as such is of little value – over the years, I have often heard 'personal reactions', which are entirely predictable and the product of uniformed and unexamined assumptions and prejudices. I.A. Richards long ago, at the very start of practical criticism, drew attention to the danger of 'stock responses' as the 'personal responses' of the uninformed reader. As a teacher, I want my students to have informed responses – and that 'informed response' might require historical knowledge, biographical knowledge, knowledge of related literature, knowledge of other works by the same writer, knowledge of the critical tradition, knowledge of contemporary theoretical approaches. I don't lose sight of the text, and close reading of the text, and of the importance of the personal response to the text, but the personal response also has to be an informed response. In my third-year Conrad class, the students' enthusiasm comes partly from engaging closely with a large number of works by Conrad so that they really feel familiar with the body of writing, but also partly from approaching that work through a variety of critical and theoretical approaches, some of which they make their own. I don't see theory and enthusiasm as opposed, but as capable of feeding each other. In the Poetic Practice class, which focuses on contemporary experimental practice (which is often theoretically informed), what has been interesting is to see how the students take ownership of theoretical ideas they have encountered elsewhere in the course through practice. For example, Barthes's idea of the self as constructed from a wash of texts and codes challenges the notion of the lyric ego as the source for the poem and moves towards various kinds of constructivist and collage approaches to

poetry in a way that the students find very liberating. Here, instead of parroting a theoretical language, they are encouraged to understand the practical implications of theories they have encountered – and how those theoretical positions might produce new models of writing.

My (limited) experience with non-academic adult readers of fiction is of an aggressive attachment (on their part) to a limited model of reading through identification which is assumed to be 'natural'. Because this model of reading is assumed as 'common sense', there is no possibility of engagement or nuancing through other models and approaches, and very limited possibilities for dialogue. Non-academic adult readers of poetry can be more open to other models and approaches. I don't have a sense of the 'charm of critical discourse' outside the academy – except through my contacts with non-academic writers and readers of poetry

**LV**. I consider the literary critic to be a writer of the second degree, a writer with an agenda, possibly. We often start from one view on the work and, while formulating it, we see the light, and we realize we have reached an unexpected conclusion, which was not very obvious to us before we had started writing the critical essay. Words do have a way of helping us understand our own reaction to the work. Criticism, then, is creative, in a way. It moulds language, too. It wields ideas. It can please, it can seduce. Eliot's criticism, Valéry's criticism did. Why is it so wrong to state that the critic is a writer, that criticism is literary creation of a different kind from fiction or poetry? Consequently, that it must take care of how it uses language? Do you think the language of criticism is free from the need to communicate clearly, which informs literary style?

**RH.** Yes, the critic is a writer, and literary criticism should be conscious of its reader and should take care of its language. Criticism needs to be clear and well-written, but that doesn't rule out theoretical and philosophical language. Like poetry, the language of criticism needs to be adequate to the complexity of its subject. Neither Eliot nor Valéry in their poetry avoids the abstraction and complexity of philosophy.

The criticism written by poets is also an interesting genre. Its functions are often quite different from those of academic criticism – often performing the function of clearing the way for the poetry, providing a framework or a new model of reading. There is also a form of poetics written by poets which is a literary creation – there are works by Bob Perelman, Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian that fall into this category.

**LV**. Is criticism going to survive? A colleague of mine remarked the other day that no one who rejected the heavy artillery of critical jargon in their essays would be read any more. Is the readable, enjoyable critic an obsolete species? Do we have to be difficult in order to prove we are worth reading?

**RH.** Again, I don't see that criticism is opposed to theory: I would want to aim for a theoretically informed criticism. There are places for various forms of criticism – the highly theoretical, the academic, and the intelligent criticism written for the intelligent, non-specialist that occasionally appears in journals and reviews.

**LV**. Theory is *the* way to go these days, but can it be the only one? Has criticism become that exclusive? Is text analysis and the study of the project of the work, of its author's intentions, interpretation of the author's view such a sin as it is said to be now? I realize modernist literature rejected objective narrative in the same way that contemporary critics reject what they call impressionism today, and I agree that we must have an approach, tools with which to deconstruct and reconstruct the work. But must we use them in such a narrow-minded way? Can they not coexist with the traditional intuition of the work? Why is the critic so strongly denied access to creation? I feel that in criticism everything is out but the mechanistic inventory of the work, which is death to the old charm of literary criticism. How must criticism behave now, in your opinion?

**RH.** I think theory has changed the paradigm: criticism can't proceed as if theory never happened. If by text analysis, you mean editorial theory and the genesis of the text, I think these are also valid approaches, but I would also want to include the new bibliography and the sociology of the text, the work of MacKenzie and Jerome McGann. The collection of essays I am co-editing on *Conrad and Magazine Culture* looks at Conrad's relations with each of the magazines in Britain and North America in which his work appeared, the cultural and political agenda of the magazine, and considers why did they want to publish him and why did he want to appear with them. Authorial intention was already problematic before theory arrived – and I think the new bibliography makes that intention problematic in other ways. Who is the author? Arguably 'Joseph Conrad' is a construct of J. C. Korzeniowski and various editors, typesetters and printers whose work contributed to the published texts that appeared under that name.

**LV**. What should we teach our students first, to dissect the work or to understand it? The method or the substance, the form or the content (if – old dispute – they can be separated)? As in literature proper, the two separated are mere fiction. The traditional, intuitive critic (whom Eliot so hated) has been punished. Who will punish the excesses of the cotemporary critic, who thinks his demolition of the mystery of creation is all that matters?

**RH.** Again, I think understanding the work and dissecting it are a reciprocal and unending process. Can the text be finally understood? Is there anything apart from successive readings with their subtle differences and shifts of emphasis – and sometimes, even, radical re-visionings?

**LV**. I feel very awkward when a very smart student writes a dissertation in which his sentences alienate me as a reader, destroy my pleasure of reading. His ideas are sometimes interesting, at other times specialized language kills all meaning. I feel like telling him he should respect language more, but I am afraid that might turn against him. He is better fitted than me to survive in the present world. How do I teach intelligent students to strike a balance between newly coined terms (usually other critics' terms, parroted more or less in the know) and the need to communicate, which is why language was born in the first place? One can create a term occasionally, but criticism should not be about creating (sometimes defacing) words; it should be about making them vehicles of meaning. Could you – who always make sense – advise a student to forget about creation and be 'scientific' all the way, sacrificing meaning to the pride of using only the right words, the words which are now 'in'?

**RH.** I think contemporary students have to be able to understand and use the contemporary critical and theoretical idiom, but they have to be using it – making it their own, serving the purpose of their own reading. There is no point merely repeating theoretical formulae. There is no point producing a collage of contemporary theories, reaching out for another name or term. The emphasis has to be on thinking and thinking through the language and theory used. The trick also is to write stylishly and pleasurably while using the most up-to-date theory. As you suggest, there has to be a concern for the reader – something more than blinding the reader with one's obscurity.

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## I WOULD BE VERY HAPPY TO AVOID THE TERM 'POSTMODERN': IT HAS BEEN USED IN SUCH DIFFERENT SENSES AS TO BE NO LONGER USEFUL.

**LIDIA VIANU:** Your poetry is an intellectual adventure, and an intellectual treat at the same time. You devour space with your thought-tentacles. Your poems go places the reader would not dream of associating. Since your have also written about contemporary poetry, what makes a poet contemporary to this beginning of the third millennium?

**ROBERT HAMPSON:** Thank you for these comments. I have had one reviewer complain that the work was intellectual, but it is designed to be intellectually playful and an adventure. Frank O'Hara and the English poet John James were important early influences. The influence of Pound and Olson is more evident in *Seaport*, which you haven't seen.

I think a poet has to be as aware as possible of the range of contemporary writing – and, for me, that would include various 'border-areas' such as poetry as installation, event, or performance. It would include an awareness of sonic, graphic and performative aspects of poetry – all of which have been explored during the last century – as well as an awareness of new technologies, such as digital poetics. It is not that the poet has to then work in all these areas, but some knowledge of what Pound called 'the scope of the possible' is an important part of the poet's training. Poets such as cris cheek, Caroline Bergvall and Redell Olsen have all been important for me in this area. Being aware of contemporary developments in the other arts also helps the poet to be alive in one's own time.

For the same reason, I think the poet has also to be aware of contemporary philosophical and theoretical issues. From the very outset, I was aware of issues around 'race' and gender. When I set up the magazine *Alembic* with Peter Barry and Ken Edwards in 1973, our explicit programme was anti-racist, anti-sexist and international. It was not that we wrote poems explicitly outlining this programme, but these values were implicit in our writing and editorial practices. More recently, my involvement with the department's MA in Postmodernism led to an intensive reading of a range of theoretical writing which had a direct impact on my poetry. It encouraged me to write in a different way and also impacted on the language and content of the poetry. Finally, I think the poet has also to be aware of contemporary political developments. I write poems which are love poems, but I am also conscious of how the moment is penetrated by multiple events, dynamics, discourses. The poetry of Allen Fisher has been very important for me in understanding this sense of the multiplicity of the moment. The private space is permeated by public events, codes, discourses.

**LV**. I have a word of my own for postmodern poets: I call them Desperado. One of the reasons is proved by your poems: you write gun (language) in hand. You wield words like bullets. Impressing the reader becomes wounding him into awareness with you. Is poetry still an effective intellectual weapon in our times?

**RH.** I would be very happy to avoid the term 'postmodern': it has been used in such different senses as to be no longer useful. (I have an essay on this, which I won't repeat here.) 'Desperado' is very flattering: there is a song of that title by Linda Ronstadt, which plays to a certain male romantic posturing … However, I take your response to the poems (here and elsewhere) seriously. The poetry is designed to move quickly and to have shocks and surprises – and traps. O'Hara writes in his 'Manifesto': You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep.'' I think your critical comments make an effective case for the personal response.

Is poetry still an effective intellectual weapon? I would like to think so, though I don't know how to measure the effect. Some of my more recent work – in a recent Poetry Review and on various websites/e-zines – is very much engaged with British and North American foreign policy. It isn't effective in the sense of stopping things happening – I was disconcerted to see that work I had published in relation to the First Gulf War could have been recycled for the Second, but I think it is vitally important for poetry (and intellectuals generally) to attempt to occupy the public sphere. I think it is effective in relation to individual readers, and it has a vital role to play in relation to destabilizing, deconstructing, estranging the dishonest language of politics. (The killing of the young Brazilian by the police with several bullets to the head was described by the former Prime Minister John Major as a 'shoot to protect' policy.)

**LV**. You call poetry 'catching the moment'... With you 'the word/ travels'. Your poems all 'tell their tale'. In very few words you create a universe of innumerable planets for the understanding. Although you are crystal clear – how I appreciate this respect for language – you can be endlessly interpreted. This is what I call true poetry, the poetry which, if we take Eliot's words for granted, 'can communicate before it is understood.' Although you write specialized criticism, you can be, just like Eliot, a wonderful practitioner. How do these two sides coexist in you?

**RH.** I like the idea of a few words working to create their own universe. The phrase 'catching the moment' very much sums up what I was attempting in that particular poem: it was like a photograph or quick sketch, but in words. The early poetry is highly visual – film and photography were important points of reference for me. With 'the word/travels', I was exploring the 'cross-cultural encounter' of a particular relationship, but I was also drawing on academic research I had been doing on Joyce and Homer. With 'tell their tale', I was engaged with the idea of narrative and poetry, and I was writing a series of poems that explored narrative through responding to the films of Godard. In some of these poems, I was interested in playing games with the audience: the assumption is often made that poems are autobiographical; in these poems I wanted to create first-person narratives which couldn't possibly be me. Later poetry is much more based in language than in the visual, and here the principle of sharp cutting between discourses both

respects language but also opens out interpretation. Again, an important early influence was the work of Lee Harwood. Harwood's combination of precision and incompleteness was very powerful. His poem 'Linen' ends:

touching you   like the
and soft as
like the scent of flowers and
like an approaching festival
whose promise is failed through carelessness

Harwood's work, too, 'communicates before it is understood', which (I suspect) is partly why it has been so little written about. What is there to say?

How do the two sides co-exist? Sometimes, as in the Joyce example, one feeds directly into the other. As time has gone by, I have had to find ways of drawing creatively on various aspects of academic practice. Sometimes, this has been a matter of using the language of theory and turning it for other purposes. Sometimes, as in C for Security, it was a matter of taking the practice of producing handbooks for students and subverting it.

**LV**. You talk in a poem about the 'survivalist desert' and the title of your collected is 'assembled fugitives'. What a wonderful description of the dystopia we live in, and which is the Desperadoes' favorite environment. One of the major Desperado features – as I see it – is their sense for the dystopic. They relish fear, alienation, the death of love/the couple, the death of the nineteen-century-long fairy tale tradition (which died with the advent of Modernism). You yourself are in love with the mind, not necessarily with anyone in flesh and blood. If you were to describe the poetic essence of your existence, how would you put it into words?

**RH.** That poem is a response to a film by John Cameron, Terminator, where the dystopic future is resituated in contemporary USA. I hadn't thought of my work as dystopic – I had hoped there was a utopian drive behind it. Perhaps the two are intertwined in a dance: 'pessimism of analysis , optimism of the will' (or should that be the other way round). I would like to think there is a sense of risk or adventure rather than fear. I guess what comes across as alienation is a sense of critical distance and what I would see as a more positive assertion of non-belonging. There is a lot of moving between cultures, a refusal of nostalgia or sense of originary identity, and part of the use of America is as a destabilizing of ideas of belonging. Identity is in flux.

I don't think there is a sense of the death of love: there are some poems (such as 'alphaville') where that is part of a dystopic urban image, but, more generally, love and the erotic are very positive features of the various worlds in the poems – and various flesh-and-blood women are behind a number of them.

**LV**. In one poem you confess yourself to be ‘caught between/ sign & sign.’ Is poetry a trap or a liberation? What exactly do you feel when you write it? The prisoner of your gift or its master?

**RH.** In that poem, I was thinking about the signs on the US freeways but also linguistic signs (and living in language). So, there is partly a sense of exhilaration, the pleasure of travel and the enjoyment of the speed and tricks of the poem – there is a wonderful book by the American poet, Rosmarie Waldrop, *The Road is Everywhere* or *Stop This Body*, which uses car journeys and actually incorporates a road-sign into each poem, and that was probably in my mind. At the same time, there is the frustration of being trapped within language – and pushing in various ways against that limit – but there is no outside to language .What is important is the irresolvable co-existence of the two. If there is mastery, there is also imprisonment.

**LV**. Most Desperado poets see themselves driving or roaming down a street. Nature is a lost realm. It comes back in your lines, but as a cosmic nature, if I can say so: you devise a picturesqueness of the universe. It feels as if you were travelling among stars. Considering this view of space, what poet do you feel closer to? It can’t be Whitman – but I suspect you do appreciate him, or you would avoid accumulation of images in his manner. What do you think of Peter Ackroyd, who (in his *The Plato Papers*) has the same view of an uncomfortable, exhilarating yet scary truth?

**RH.** Since becoming aware of Roy Fisher’s ‘City’ and Allen Fisher’s ‘Place ‘ early in the 1970s (at a time when I had recently moved from Liverpool and was now settled in London), I have been very consciously working to develop an urban poetics. The clearest sign of that was my volume *Seaport*. I am very conscious of myself as primarily urban in orientation, though ‘over the bridge’ is located on the English/Welsh border. But I am also conscious of being an internationalist. I have no patience with the ‘Little Englandism’ of some poets of the 1950s. The great advantage of Modernism was that it was an international movement and involved international affiliations.

I see what you mean about nature coming back as cosmic nature. I think of ‘the planet traverses / multi-dimensional spaces’. That poem is routed in travel and the cross-cultural encounters in which I am interested as both poet and critic, but the internationalism there has become a global awareness. Again, I am conscious of that cosmic concern as an element in Allen Fisher’s work.. For myself, I am interested in sudden changes of scale or perspective – and that would be found also in the Renaissance poetry of John Donne, a poet who has always interested and excited me. Another example, ‘planets suspended in space/on silver wires’ uses the line-break to produce that shift of scale and perspective – from the cosmic to the toy or model. Again, I feel this is very close to the contractions and expansions of space in Donne.

Charles Olson, of course, whom I came at through Allen Fisher, would be crucial for my thinking about space. More recently, I have been interested in space, travel and cartography through post-modern geographers such as my former colleague Dennis Cosgrove and spatial thinkers such as de Certeau and Lefebvre.

**LV**. You are anti-conventional. You give up punctuation, even words (using 4 for ‘for’, for instance), and you make me think of the American tradition in poetry (e.e. cummings). Where is poetry going today? What are its new conventions, in your opinion? Is it still the most national of arts, as Eliot called it?

**RH.** Yes, the lack of punctuation and the use of lower case do come out of the American tradition. I read some cummings thirty or forty years ago, but the important influences at the outset of my career were Pound, Olson, Williams and the traditions of American poetry that come out of them. Olson, in particular, has been important in terms of the use of the page space and treating the space of the page as a compositional field.

Subsequently, I have been very conscious of the LANGUAGE school as my US contemporaries – Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman, Lyn Hejinian – and others such as Rosmarie Waldrop and Kathleen Fraser. I have had a sense of dialogue with their work. At the same time, it should be said that I would see my work as situated within a community of ‘London-based’ poets (many have since moved out of London), who would describe similar influences and would see themselves as part of a similar dialogue. I am thinking of people like Robert Sheppard, Adrian Clark, cris cheek, Harry Gilonis, Gavin Selerie, Peter Middleton, Caroline Bergvall …

More recently, I have been brought into contact with a younger group of poets (and other writing practices) through my colleague, Redell Olsen. As a result of exposure to her work and her concerns, I have become interested in the relationships between the verbal and the visual, the performative aspects of poetry, and new digital technologies of writing. My own work has been influenced by bookarts, installations, and performance. I think this I one of the directions in which poetry is going today. I have been very impressed by the performance and installation work of Redell’s students, *Gilbert & Grape*, and by the digital poetry of her student, John Sparrow .

I find it hard to think of poetry as a ‘national’ art. My own practice has always been ready to learn from other European and North American poetries, and, at different times, I have also been in dialogue with poets in New Zealand and Australia. With email, all of this dialogue is even easier. HOW2, the electronic journal that is currently edited by Redell, has an editorial board that includes Australian and North American poets, and has world-wide poetry as its constituency.

**LV**. All Desperado writers are solitary. Poetry is itself a solitary game. Would you be willing to state that you belong to a group of poets similar to you, to a trend? Because I have this feeling that you are a trend in yourself, the same as Alan

Brownjohn (whom I have also interviewed and about whose work I have written a book) has created what I like to call Brownjohnism. Would Hampsonism shock you?

**RH.** As I suggested in the previous answer, I am very conscious of my poetry being produced within a community that is both local (in so far as my immediate contacts are in London) and global (through meetings and regular email conversations with poets in Europe, in the US and in Australia). An exhibition about Dada in the mid-60s had an important impact on me, and then I grew up in Liverpool at the time of the 'Liverpool Scene' and was part of the audience for Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, Brian Patten and others – so the idea of poetry NOT being solitary was always very attractive to me.

Through Olson, I came to know about Black Mountain College and was also conscious of the Bauhaus, so I have always been interested in the idea of poetry and the arts as part of a collective experiment and inquiry. Even if we think of the Romantics, Wordsworth learned from Coleridge; Byron and Shelley were in dialogue; Keats was part of a supportive group.

**LV**. What do you think is the future of poetry? Will anyone but the poets themselves read it? Will literature survive this terrible fight with the (tele)screen? Is the internet good or bad for the future of poetry?

**RH.** I think poetry has a range of futures. There will be at least one kind of poetry read largely by other poets. This is most obvious in relation to various avant-garde poetries, but it also applies to commercial poetry as well. Poets are perhaps the most attentive readers of other poets' work – whether that poetry is unconventional or highly commercial. But I suspect the same goes for musicians: Bob Dylan's account of his encounters with other people's work shows a very close attention to the structure of songs, the relation to precursors, the range of possible musical treatments. The same goes for jazz musicians talking, for example, about the work of Joe Harriot.

I think the fight is not so much with the telescreen as with digital media, but, as I have suggested above, I think there are also things to be done with digital media and performance – and that might be where the future of poetry lies.

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## David Harsent, *Postmodernism has proved such a muddle and mess*

Interview with **DAVID HARSENT** (born 1942), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** With poetry one likes, questions come easily and informally. In your *Selected Poems* I could not help noticing obvious Eliotian echoes. You were born in 1942. Eliot died in 1965. Was he a major influence? *Dawn Walk* reminds me faintly of the 'cruellest month', *The Woman's Soliloquies* of the 'typist home for tea', of the cities bursting and reforming in *The Waste Land*, *After Dark* sends to *Gerontion* under the 'windy knob'. Slowly, these echoes fade. You also write for music, which Eliot would have loved to do, I am sure. I think you have in common with Eliot the idea of the dignity of poetry, its earnestness and intensity. Would you associate your beginnings with Eliot's verse?

**DAVID HARSENT:** Influences are subterranean, I think. I've never been conscious of any Eliot influence in my work, though he was certainly an influence on the way I regarded modern poetry when I was in my teens. He was the man who changed everything. I didn't have a formal education, so I came at everything with an autodidact's lack of structural references: a kind of innocence not to be recommended. For that reason, it seemed to me that Modernism had only just happened. The day that Picasso woke up and decided to do away with perspective — the day that Eliot wrote line three of *Prufrock* — seemed like the day before yesterday. I had this mental image of the Georgians, lounging in their book-lined studies, detecting a sudden seismic shift, a sinister change in the weather, and looking up, startled but, as yet, not aware that the shudder in the foundations was the aftershock of most of their empire falling into the sea. This wasn't an accurate picture, of course. For one thing, it ignored the poetry of the wars, none of which I'd read at the time. It was only later that I started to work out the time-scales. Or, rather, *read in* the time scales.

This was 1958/9. I was working in a bookshop. Also working there was a man in his early sixties who was a great reader of poetry, but whose copies of Flecker and Dowson were still, figuratively speaking, by his bedside. I came from a working-class family; he was the only person I'd ever met who also liked poetry. As a result of our friendship, I was reading *The Golden Road to Samarkand* and *Non sum qualis eram...Cynareae* at the same time as *The Waste Land* and the Imagists. I read Eliot as if he were new. Of course, he was still *news* in the Poundian sense and, in any case, how else does one read? My oddly foreshortened view of literary history meant that that Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn seemed to follow hard on Eliot's heels.

My bookshop friend was half-French and had spent many years translating *Les Fleurs du Mal* into a sort of Masefield English, so one of my first strong influences (though not in style, of course) was Baudelaire. I was delighted by the idea of a syphilitic dandy with a mulatto mistress. Later, I began to understand a little of Baudelaire's genius.

**LV**. How would you describe yourself as a reader of poetry? What does a poem have to be to do something to you?

**DH**. It's only possible, really, to talk about individual poems, or about a body of work. I'd need a text in front of me in order to talk about my responses. It's easier, sometimes, to talk about what a poem shouldn't be: fake, self-regarding, smug.

**LV**. I find in your lines a gasping limpidity, a breathless respect for language, for communication. A large part of contemporary poetry relies heavily on defying common sense, defying the reader's understanding. The word is not encoded but twisted, so as to bar easy access to an obvious meaning. If anything, contemporary poets are inaccessible (not all of them, but so many). What do you think of that?

**DH**. The whole poetry-for-poets discussion is a tangled web. Two notions have been confused: the first, that poetry is found rebarbative because it uses a coded language; the second that poetry delights in being found rebarbative and uses a coded language as a ring-fence. So I guess we know that the problem has to do with language.

These two notions look similar but are utterly different. One has to do with people who don't read poetry, don't have an interest in poetry, but feel they can comment on poetry as part of a more general argument regarding society and the arts and the issue of accessibility. They seem to believe that any poem should yield its meaning at a glance and if it doesn't, they tend to use that much-misused (and in this context largely meaningless) word 'elitist'. The second notion is part of a critical war between so-called language poets, or other glum obscurantists, and poets who are mistakenly thought of as 'traditional'.

Part of the problem regarding the first, socio-artistic, notion is that poetry is a minority taste and there seems to be a wayward pejorative linked to that notion. It's basically Philistine to suggest that poetry needs to find a way of reaching people. The reverse might be true, but that's an educational issue. I've worked in music theatre and have encountered the same sort of attitude towards opera: it's elitist, it shuns people. Not true. Opera, like poetry, is a club anyone can join. Far from being inaccessible, it's on the doorstep.

Just recently, I've read an article by a British publisher who suggests that poetry would reach more people were it less male-dominated and if book design were less austere. He also seems to suggest (by quoting a dreadful poem recently published by himself, of course) that it ought to be more inspirational and simple-minded. He even hauls up from the gruesome past Adrian Mitchell's sloppy slogan: *Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people*. This kind of anti-intellectual, crowd-pleasing drivel is actually an attack on poetry. (It's even more distasteful in this case for being self-serving.) No one should give any credence to the idea that an audience can be gained by force-feeding it with custom-built garbage. The whole notion of pursuing an audience is for impresarios or TV execs. A poet's task is to do his/her best work and publish it.

The notion of doctrinal obscurantism is different. This is no place to launch an attack on language poets but, in general, I consider them the enemy.

**LV**. When you use rhyme, it is discreet and often imperfect, which makes the poems even more appealing. Your forte is the direct image, if we can use that term, which is a paradox. Your images are clear, their meaning is not that obvious, though. Like any good poet, you are indirect. How do you go about this indirectness, since you do not do it the way your contemporaries do (confusing sense, using hysterical uncouth rhymes)?

**DH**. I like para-rhyme for its music. Mostly, it just falls to hand. I like the way rhyme, or slant-rhyme contributes to the way the poem works: the way it progresses. I like the directions it leads me in. As for image: my poems almost never begin with an idea; they almost always begin with an image that, as often as not, arrives with a phrase or two attached and continues to accrue language as I start to work it. I proceed much more by instinct than by plan; I can't imagine beginning with a formula for a poem or some sort of pre-determined narrative structure (that's not to say I begin lacking a subject, of course.). I don't want to talk about 'organic growth' because it's misleading: too close to the silly idea of poet as medium. Maybe it's more a matter of going hand over hand.

I'd be pretty suspicious of anyone who could describe his compositional methods in any detail: maybe that's why I can't answer your question about indirectness in a direct way. I think it must have something to do with strength of image and the way that images provide a narrative sense, but if I stray too far down that road I'll begin to sound like an old-fashioned Symbolist.

**LV**. Many of your poems are very much like stream of consciousness in the third person. They betray the mind of a fiction writer. Do you also write fiction?

**DH**. I've always worked in sequences and, since *Dreams of the Dead*, have published long or book-length sequences. I have often used personae, too. Not me in a mask: genuine fictional creations. My most recent collection, *Marriage*, consists of two sequences: one is (very) loosely based on the enigmatic relationship between Pierre Bonnard and Marthe de Meligny, the other concerns the hare — a creature who often appears in my work as trickster. The idea, I guess, has been to create a fiction where the overall narrative can be discerned by inference, using the moments and incidents that are made available.

That aside, I have written a novel — *From An Inland Sea* — which was published in 1985, and which I tend to think of as partly successful. Which must mean it was partly unsuccessful, though to what degree needn't concern us. Like all poets, I have to have a day-job. I worked as a bookseller, then as a publisher, but it was killing me, so I quit and decided to try to make a living by my pen.  Literary journalism is very badly paid, so I wrote a crime novel more in

hope than expectation. It was published round the world. Since then, I've published ten crime novels under various names. They allow me my own schedules, they allow me to work alone, they allow me a different kind of writing (recreational writing, perhaps), they're cadenced and tough and dark and they put food on my table.

I wouldn't call myself a novelist.

**LV**. The core of your poems is usually one small gesture or incident, which is surrounded by the psychology of the poetic voice. You use characters, you do not confess. That makes it impossible to guess your life from your poetry. Would you be willing to tell our readers more about yourself? Education, family background, what you wanted from poetry and what you have achieved?

**DH**. I was born to a working-class family. We lived on a housing estate. My father was a bricklayer. When I was born, he was being shelled in the Western Desert. I went to disgracefully bad just-post-war schools, the last of which specialized in technical subjects about which I knew nothing and cared less. The teachers were under-qualified and over-aggressive. The headmaster was a boorish buffoon. When I was in my twenties, someone mentioned to me that he'd died and I remember feeling elated. The combination of estate, schools and thuggish teachers meant I knew how to fight. Later, I learned how to avoid fights.

I can't remember a time when I didn't write. The first piece of work that I thought of as 'a piece' — something of mine — was a story I wrote in school when I was six. I remember handing it to the teacher with the clear feeling that it was only on loan to her. I read all the time. I read while I was cleaning my teeth; I read while playing football; I read in my sleep. Notebooks were prized possessions; a clean, ruled page had an irresistible, seductive look. I still can't pass a stationer's without going in: the hunt for the perfect notebook...

I left school at sixteen and got a job in a bookshop. While I was there I started publishing poems in magazines. This led to a friendship with Ian Hamilton, a fine poet and editor of two immensely influential little magazines, *the Review* and *the New Review*. Ian was a tremendous factor in my life: he published my work (along with others, of course), gave me a freelance reviewing job on the TLS, and showed my first manuscript to Jon Stallworthy at Oxford University Press, who published it (in all the Press published five collections of mine together with a *Selected Poems*; my last two collections have been with Faber & Faber). Ian also remained a close friend until his premature death last December.

I published my first collection, *A Violent Country*, while still working at the bookshop, and received my first Arts Council Bursary shortly afterwards. This enabled me to give up work for a while. A year later, the money ran out and I got a job in publishing. For the next decade or more, I pretended to be a businessman; in truth, I was a fairly good editor; I faked the rest. The job became increasingly onerous, I was writing less and less, so I resigned, gave back the BMW and the expense account, and wrote a crime novel 'on spec' (as I've mentioned). At just the same time, I had

been asked by Harrison Birtwistle to collaborate with him on an opera for the Royal Opera House. It was a busy time. Since then, a crime novel a year has allowed me to pay my way and I've had a great deal more time for poetry.

The other details are a list: I live in London with my second wife, who is an actress; we have a daughter, who is twelve; I have three children by my first marriage.

You ask me what I want from poetry. The answer is nothing. Poetry seems to want quite a lot from me, but that's as it should be.

**LV**. I am trying to find out in what way I could include you in what I call Desperado poetry – another word for Postmodernist, maybe. I mean by it that young poets try to make their own laws and use a gun against anyone who attempts at classifying them, at implying they might have anything in common with one another. The slogan today is different, and if these poets are similar in any way, it is by being so dissimilar. Your lines give the feeling of speech (Eliot tried so hard to get there yet could not), but you also have an air of 'loftiness' which would be very Eliotian if it did not carefully avoid his 'poetry' (which he desperately tried to 'cut out' and in vain). You do what Eliot was dreaming of. Where does that place you? Could you state what the difference between you and other contemporary poets is?

**DH**. The word 'loftiness' struck my eye and raised a bruise. I'd agree that some of my early work might be a little too well-made. Someone once told me that my lines were impeccable, and I took it as a criticism (though it wasn't meant that way). My last two collections — *A Bird's Idea of Flight* and *Marriage* — mark a significant departure from books like *Mister Punch* and *News From the Front*. I'm not taking issue with those earlier books — they're part of a journey and I'm still travelling — but in the last two, there's a distinct change of direction.

I didn't know it was coming; and it wasn't the result of any radical dissatisfaction with what had gone before, or a conscious desire to seek a new direction. But I was restless. I was talking about this with Ian Hamilton over a meal one day, and he said, 'Try lengthening your line.' That was all. I don't know what he'd seen or intuited, but it proved crucial. Just that. Lengthen your line. I did, and *A Bird's Idea of Flight* was the upshot.

If I do what Eliot was dreaming of, I'm delighted. I think that my work in music theatre trades off an ability with dialogue; my fiction uses direct speech a good deal. I can see that my poems often approximate to speech; that is, the 'voice' reads out loud in your head. *A Bird's Idea of Flight* is couched in the first person, though the character in question is a fictional one; *Marriage* promotes the voice of the painter (nominally Bonnard, but better described as 'a painter-husband'); *Lepus* (the hare sequence) uses the voice of the hare a good deal.

I think it's dangerous to categorise individual output in broad terms like 'Postmodern', not least since Postmodernism has proved such a muddle and mess. Maybe we never properly learned the lessons of Modernism and that's why people are still worrying about 'modern' verse and 'modern' music almost a century after the event. I never

know whether to be amused or angry when people talk of (say) Birtwistle's music as impenetrable ninety years after the first performance of *Le Sacre Du Printemps*.

Critics in the UK are constantly (just as critics always have) trying to round poets up into schools, but it's noticeable that the names given to schools are almost always coined by the critics themselves. Groups, if they exist, often have to do with geography. There was a (short) time when critics liked to speak of a 'Review school' of poetry which, in theory, had to do with a propensity for very short, emotionally-charged poems. There was an ounce of truth in this, but each of those involved had his own purpose and his own version of the short poem. For example, I was interested in the way short poems could serve as brief chapters in a much longer story. It was the beginning of my attempt to forge an interrupted narrative of some length using a basically lyrical vocabulary. I suppose that, if I were to have to nominate some characteristic that sets me aside from my contemporaries, it would be this career-long preoccupation to tackle complex subjects through what might be described as the 'dramatic sequence'. 'Not content', as one reviewer put it, 'to isolate shining moments.'

**LV**. Is rhyme a must in your poetry? What does rhythm mean to your poems? You have both, but so discreet that they take a while to become apparent. What does poetry mean to you?

**DH**. I've pretty much dealt with rhyme in my answer above. Rhyme, rhythm, cadence — *music* — are all important to me, but not, of course, a be-all. I like the rhythm, supported by glancing rhyme, to grow out of meaning and support it. Without music, without good sounds, how does poetry differ from prose? Rhythm is part of poetry's unique strength; part of the way something can be understood before meaning has quite surfaced.

You ask what poetry means to me. Poetry is a way of life.

**LV**. *Gawain* is both a poem and a libretto. It reminds me of Yeats, Goethe, and, above all, *Murder in the Cathedral*. It seems to me that, although writing for the stage, you remain faithful to poetry. What does this libretto mean in the context of your poetry?

**DH**. *Gawain* was a tall order. When Harrison Birtwistle contacted me and asked me to make a libretto from *Sir Gawain and the Grene Knight* I was delighted — that benchmark for any English poet. Then the magnitude of the task struck me— *that benchmark for any English poet!* Apart from having to square up to the Gawain poet, I found myself facing technical problems that were pretty considerable. To begin with, there's little direct speech in the poem and musical drama consists of nothing but direct speech.

I had several decisions to make. The first was to re-work the piece, retaining the narrative (or my version of it) but using almost nothing of the original poem apart from one or two very familiar and unignorable lines. The second was to

bring Morgan Le Fay centre-stage, so to speak. In the poem, she barely appears, though she is the architect of all Gawain's trials. In my version, she is rarely off stage (The women in the piece — Morgan, Bertilak's wife, Guinevere — interested me much more than the self-regarding, callow boys of the Arthurian court.) Of those men, only Gawain and the Fool (an invention of mine) achieve any sort of insight or awakening. The third decision was to write in verse.

In a sense, it's pointless to write libretti in verse because the music has its own way with the words. However, it's necessary for the librettist to have his own compositional strategy. My serenade (*Serenade the Silkie*: Julian Grant wrote the music) was heavily cadenced and had occasional rhyme, but wasn't verse. *The Woman and the Hare*, a piece set by Birtwistle for the Nash Ensemble, where the words were shared by a reciter and a soprano, was a specially-commissioned poem. My television opera, *When She Died*, (music by Jonathan Dove) was quite deliberately written in prose — much of it the demotic — because of its subject matter (three linked fictions that take place on the day of the funeral of Diana, princess of Wales) though parts are cadenced and even fall to rhyme now and then. I'm about to embark on a new opera with Birtwistle — *Minotaur* — and I'm not at all sure, just yet, whether I'll write in verse or not. Something tells me it might be a macaronic piece.

The example of my own work that I held in mind when I was starting *Gawain* was a short sequence called *The Windhound*, which only appears in my Selected Poems. It dealt, to some extent, with the loss of instinct, as does *Gawain*. The other aspect that particularly interested me was what I saw as the extended metaphor of the indoors/outdoors division between culture and nature, between society's rules and a self-governing wilderness, between the trappings of a spurious decency and unignorable appetites, between the mendacity inherent in 'civilised' behaviour and the unfakeable bare bones of landscape and weather.

The *Windhound* is verse, of course, so maybe it just led me in that direction. You can see *Gawain* is poetry on the page; in the opera house, I'm not so sure.

**LV**. What do you expect of a poetry critic? What should he pay attention to in order to reach a definition of contemporary poetry?

**DH**. What I expect from poetry critics is that they shouldn't be self-serving and that they'll have done their homework. I also expect (that is, I'm prepared for the fact) that they'll have a strong point of view. As with critics, so with anthologists. An anthology without a point of view is a garage sale. It goes without saying that a critic should be intelligent and well-read, but it's never guaranteed. People sometimes complain that poetry critics tend always to be poets, as if they ought to be something else. What?

Generally speaking, the level of criticism in the UK isn't good. There are a few excellent poet-reviewer-critics, but there are also some lame-brains. When *the Review* and *the New Review* were in existence (c.1963-1978) they set a standard in criticism that hasn't, I feel, been matched since. They weren't interested in making friends and were

stringent in their views. In short, punches were never pulled. Hamilton once remarked that the magazine '...needed its friends almost as much as it needed its enemies.' There's little of that acerbity at present, and little of the intellectual rigour and not enough of the true feeling for poetry that characterised those journals.

There seems to be a shortage of intelligence at present, a refusal to take poetry seriously. There's also a lot of over-publishing, not least in the area of public subsidy. It's clear that some of the newer published poets have little or no grasp of literary history — even recent literary history; it's as if they read only their own work and the work of a few friends. Time will find these sad amateurs out, of course, and their feebleness is evident in the poems, but it's annoying to have them milling about and knocking into things.

**LV**. Is it important to you to be different from the other poets? Have you ever thought of a set of rules you go by?

**DH**. I don't set out to be like, or unlike, anyone. I have my own work to do. As I said earlier, if I have rules, they're instinctual.

**LV**. From your work as an editor, could you name a direction you think fiction and poetry are following? What is to become of literature in this constant, unfair and yet challenging battle with the screen?

**DH**. Directions, no. Individual writers develop (or they don't). I think we're all pretty much on our own. Now and then, a group of writers, or painters, or dramatists might get together and declare themselves *for* this and *against* that, but it's mostly windy polemic, or attention-seeking, or an oblique method of criticism. Such movements invariably disband almost as soon as they're formed, and lose any coherence as soon as someone starts to draw up a manifesto. Anyone of real talent has usually walked away long before they all pose for the group photo.

I don't consider poetry (or fiction) to be in a fight with the screen. Some might say that the screen has stolen some of our audience, but that's not strictly speaking true: there was never a contest or a referendum. Some of a *potential* audience, maybe, but so what? We live in a screen culture: it's a fact. Do fewer people read than used to in (say) the fifties? If so, what were they reading then? You might say that popular culture is now screen-based, but I don't think there's a strong case for suggesting that it did *poetry* a disservice. There's a theory that reading is simply a better (less corrupt?) activity than watching TV or movies; in fact, we're told that when people watch TV their brain-waves are flatlining; but I'm not sure that makes a case for the airport novel.

Is poetry a minority interest? Yes. Has this always been the case? Yes. Does it matter? No. It's part of the deal. All references to a lost 'aural' culture are wishful thinking. Save it for the folklorists.

**LV**. Is drama important today? You have written for the stage – opera – so you obviously have a taste of how poetry and the stage interact (they have done so since Shakespeare and before). Is that a combination with a bright future, do you think?

**DH**. I'm married to an actress, so I see a lot of theatre. Also, I used to be a theatre critic. As with poetry, there's some interesting work being done, and there's a lot of dreck.
Excepting Shakespeare at Stratford and the Globe, and the big musicals and middle-class revivals in the west end (London's theatre district), drama often struggles to find an audience, especially new drama and especially in the provinces. It's not all bleak, though. Some playwrights will always fill a theatre and they're not just Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter or David Hare. I've seen some exceptional work and have also seen some plays that took risks and failed, but were by no means uninteresting. There are some very interesting women playwrights working in the UK at present. Caryl Churchill's 'Far Away' (2000) is one of the best plays I've seen for a long time.

Craig Raine suggested that the last refuge for poetry on stage might be opera, and I can see what he meant, though there's a reason for thinking that the stage offers the poet an opportunity for polemic. I'm thinking particularly of Sean O'Brien's theatre/radio play *Laughter When We're Dead* and his version of Aristophanes' *The Birds*. This is not to say that there aren't playwrights concerned with political or social issues, there are many; but the point is that both of O'Brien's plays are in verse.

Eliot's plays seem to me dead on the page, let alone on stage. You could play *The Family Reunion* in mask and get more out of the characters. Maybe it's significant that O'Brien's plays are both viperish and darkly comic and take Restoration drama as a model; dramatic verse has built-in emphases; perhaps its mannerisms need to be matched by broad expression, broad narrative movement and equally broad responses in the audience.

I can imagine writing in verse for the stage, but have no great ambition to do so. I think that dramatic vision and poetic vision are very different. Drama is, quite properly, a joint venture; poetry is not. Drama is democratic; poetry is not. Poetry is best on the page; drama isn't itself until it escapes the page.

**LV**. If you had a choice, what critics would you read and what critics would you like to write about your work: scholars or creators? Is scholarly criticism to be commended for its forbidding jargon? Can't informed criticism resort to commonsensical words in order to reach the depth of the text? Is this new multitude of inherited, worshipped terms the only way? This is the point where I think postmodernism is very wrong. I wonder how you see it.

**DH**. Criticism is only useful — and then can be indispensable — when it talks about an individual poem or a body of work. Criticism that wants to promulgate a doctrine or be otherwise prescriptive, is usually up to no good. In crude terms, the critic's job is to excoriate the second-rate and praise the good, but the former task is a lot more important

than the latter. Good work will almost always come to the fore; bad work can establish itself by stealth unless there are enough people determined to cry ‘fake!’

And, yes, of course it’s possible to talk about poetry in a jargon-free way though some poems positively *invite* jargon, they *require* jargon. In fact, they probably *deserve* jargon.

There’s a difference, too, between the kind of crypto-scholarly obfuscation you’re talking about and someone writing about poetry in a way that requires some knowledge on the part of the reader. A. Alvarez once observed that if a poet is going to bring to a poem a good deal of intelligence, sensitivity and knowledge of the form, he has a right to expect a reader to bring to it at least a degree of those qualities. I’d go along with that. It applies to criticism, too.

**LV**. There are quite a number of poets today. Some are highly enjoyable, others are highly praised, though maybe less appealing. How and in whom do you see poetry surviving?

**DH**. There are a fair number of good poets writing in Britain today, by which I mean more than a few, not dozens. A list would be invidious because I’d be sure to forget someone.

I wish criticism were more vigorous and less worried about giving offence. Maybe we all know each other too well. (I’m off the hook, here; I gave up reviewing a long time ago.) For some time now, I’ve been advocating a poetry magazine in which the reviews would be anonymous, as they were in the old days of the TLS. *The New Review*, though, managed to draw up its battle-lines without having to make its combatants faceless and nameless.

Poetry will go forward thanks to poets of talent, it’s as simple as that; the talentless loud-mouths and the windy self-promoters will always be with us, but they don’t matter. And, despite what seems an endless (and massively tedious) debate about the ‘audience’ for poetry, the readership will remain both small and secure. Readership is not an issue. Poetry will always be read.

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## Selima Hill, *Sometimes autobiography is not true enough*

Interview with **SELIMA HILL** (born 13 October 1945), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** Reading your poetry has made me feel as if I had known you for ever, but I do not know anything in fact. To start with, would you reveal some of the facts of your life, such as: when and where you were born, what you have studied, how you came to be a poet, what your life is like? Any connection between you and John Fowles (since you live in Lyme Regis, Dorset)?

**SELIMA HILL**: I was born in 1945. When I was a baby I was burnt in a fire. I was rescued from my burning cot by a farmer who saw the flames. I spent six months (maybe a year, I'm not sure) in hospital. Of course, I nearly died. An of course my mother felt guilty... I was born into a family of painters. My grandparents and my parents were painters. (My ex-husband and my son are also painters. My daughter is a photographer. My youngest son is a writer.) My father was sixty when I was born. I was sent to boarding school, and then University, where I read philosophy. I then had a breakdown and spent another year in hospital (Psychiatric hospital). There is no connection between John Fowles and myself (except that I used to live in his flat – one big room overlooking the sea).

I now live with my various animals in a house with a small orchard near the beach – and also near my seven grandchildren and my ex-husband and his new wife and my children and their husbands and horses...

**LV**. Your poems float between imagination and tenderness, in a land nobody else has discovered yet. *Violet* is both an angry and a loving volume. Actually, I do not think you can hate anyone, not when you write, anyway. Your clarity is one of extraordinary images, which invoke very ordinary feelings. You make no effort to be more (or less) than you are. You are so very natural in every line. What do you think, writing as you write, about poets who push their own life and loves out of literature and declare they only want to imagine, not to leave signs of what they have lived?

**SH**. I do not like writing about other poets in this way. Because I love them all! And in poetry – it's a big space out there – we can say what we want.

**LV**. So far, I have seen a lot in contemporary poetry, from wonderful feminine sensibility (such as Ruth Fainlight's) to the most astonishing bookish texts and abstract rhymes (no names here). Your poetry is, maybe, one in a million. You are not ashamed to write about your own life, but you do it in such a way that it becomes everyone's. I am desperately

curious to know a lot more about the elder sister, the lodger, the lover whose portrait as a horse (title of your latest volume) does not seem to have been written yet. Would you tell me who they are and what binds you to them?

**SH**. The sister, lover, lodger etc. are my ways of writing about myself. The only energy we have is the energy of our own lives. But sometimes autobiography is not true enough. In order to be ruthlessly accurate (which is my aim) it is sometimes necessary to fictionalize: in this way I feel free. (I do not want to hurt anyone: Art is not an excuse for hurting anyone...)

**LV**. In one of your short letters you say that you have visited Romania and liked it. How and when? Since you do not write tourist poems, I see no mention of it anywhere, nor is there mention in your lines of any of the places you have visited. What do you know about the ex-communist world?

**SH**. I do not write about Romania, or the places I have travelled to. But the 20$^{th}$ century poetry of Romania has influenced my work very much, I think, although no one seems to have commented on, or noticed this. Again, I think the reasons are the same. I want to feel free. I experienced my family as oppressive. I had difficulty forming relationships. My suffering – although I am so white, middle-class, privileged etc. etc. – my suffering responded to the suffering of the Romanian people – their passion, energy, courage, humour, guts. How WARM they are! And how SUBVERSIVE!!

I was several days at Oradea. I loved everything about Romania. (I've also been to Siberia, Mongolia, Russia and China; also worked in Prague; also lived and worked in France, Spain, Italy, Iceland, Tunisia, Toronto – planning to return to China next year. Also visit Easter Island). Romania felt warm and wild and subversive – big big heart and smiles in spite of everything!

**LV**. *Violet* describes your mother's death seen through a child's eyes, your own. The narrative of your poems is so strong that I cannot help but wonder what actually happened, although you do make poetry out of it, meaning that it would not be the story that would make the poem, but the other way round.

**SH**. I take what the world throws at me, and spin, twist, skim, fly, flip, throw it back – I am not saying *my* life is uniquely special, but I am saying, Look, *my* life is like this, and *your* life is like that, and thus we are two suffering beings, I am special and you are special.

**LV**. Your images are both sharp and tender. You seem to ignore poetry while you are writing it. Your major concern is finding the most suggestive word, the most apt to give a concentrated (actually a one-word) description of a person, a

feeling, an incident. I think you write numberless haiku poems: each word is its own poem, with you. Considering this respect versus words, what do you think of those contemporary poets who empty their words of all emotion and try to fill them with artificial, striking music or bookish trips into other texts?

**SH**. I am who I am. I remember I am unique – just like everyone else!

**LV**. Your emotions – love, loss of childhood, loneliness wherever you are, need for sympathy, total lack of communication, introvertness – are overwhelming. They are so, while dressed in the garb of meek, commonsensical words. The poetic load is not placed upon the lexical meaning of words, but on their unusual associations. Your mind leaps from sensation to idea within seconds. I have trouble pinning you down: you are neither emotional nor intellectual, you are both alert and soothing, you feel love and hatred at the same time. Where would you place yourself, what kind of a poet do you think you are? What matters most for you in poetry?

**SH**. I have a man's brain in a woman's body. My brain was educated by men at Cambridge (I got a scholarship etc. etc.) but emotionally I am a cripple. What was I supposed to do with my body? My parents and teachers were strict. I did not feel listened to or understood by them. Only by nature and silence – and swimming! Nobody gives you the power – you just take it (or nobody gave me the power, I just took it). This is what I tell my students.

What matters most for me? Love, joy, truth, guts, intimacy. A sense of fellowship. Secrets. Shame. Beauty. Nowhere else can love or beauty go so freely as in poetry (art).

**LV**. You wrote *Please Can I have a Man* in order to explain that you would like someone who:

sticks all my carefully selected postcards –
sent from exotic cities
he doesn't expect to come with me to,
but would if I asked, which I will do –
with nobody else's, up on his bedroom wall

and

Who is not prepared to say I'm 'pretty' either,

who can be

affectionate and undisciplined and uncomplicated.

It may not seem much to ask but it is far more than men offer, so your poetry is not happy. It rejoices verbally but weeps emotionally, so you offer a rainbow of effects. Do you see yourself as a happy poet?

**SH**. The person I am is much nicer than the person I think I ought to be... Poets in their poems feel safe. And when we feel safe we feel free. Free to love. To trust our reader. To forgive our tormentors. To be tender. To meet God, and camels and suitcases and dogs and lettuces... 'If you have a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail' (Nietzsche). If you are a poet, everything begins to look beautiful! I don't mean you have to *like* it (it, the world, everything) – but you do have to *love* it. This is what my poetry can say. All poetry is love poetry. We sit on God's velvet cushion. We are God's spies! I would rather be good than happy. By being good, I will be happy. I cannot make myself be happy. I can only make myself be good and other people happy.

**LV**. You talk about *Being Fifty*, which makes you 'feel large,/ large and cold/ like someone else's fridge.' You have a tender sense of humour, your irony heals instead of pinching. Your poetry could not be described without using the words tenderness and humour. Most contemporary poets go to great lengths to avoid both. Do you think there is anyone writing in your vein today? Would you say you belonged to a group? Who else would be there, besides you?

**SH**. I have 'no car, no TV, no radio, no lover – no problem!' to quote a recent newspaper article headline about me! Happiness? I want to make *other people* happy. (Not myself. That's impossible). I want my reader to feel close to me, understood, loved by me, kissed by me... I write for myself. I write for strangers. But when I meet real people face to face I feel trapped – as if I am a bad person. Ugly. Dirty. Inadequate. (Not at all the person I feel I am when I am writing, the person who is one with all things!)

**LV**. When trying to bring writers together under the heading of Desperado, I start from the one assumption that contemporary authors are mainly similar in their dissimilarity: they all want to be their own trend and use all devices to make sure they cannot be pinned down. You could not care less, I think, who is or is not like you. You just write your poems. The singular manner in which you do it comes almost unconsciously, or am I wrong? Do you take great pains to write a line? Does it take long for you to finish a poem? I should say the feeling takes longer, the words come as a jet. Is that the case?

**SH**. I write very fast in very small writing and don’t read back. (I can’t read my own writing without glasses). I write fast to feel free and keep ahead of the censor, who, he or she, is always hammering at my heels... After writing fast I leave it for a month or two, or more. Then I go back and cut about 9/10s away: cut, cut!

**LV**. *Jesu’s Blood* states, ‘I see my job as making people happy’. Your husband leaves with a girl-friend, and you repeat stubbornly, ‘I won’t./ I won’t be angry. Can you understand that?’ It hurts and you make poetry out of it. You make poetry out of pain more than once. Your mother dies, the ‘lodger’ hurts you, a man fails to love well. You make people happy because you do not want them to go through your pain. At some point, though, you must be happy yourself. What makes you happier, life or poetry? Or, maybe, the one could not exist without the other?

**SH**. I do want people to go through my pain – in other words, by going through *my* pain, they go through *their* pain. There is no other way but *through*. You can’t go over it. You can’t go under it. You’ve got to go THROUGH it! Go naked into the shower of truth.

**LV**. The poem *The Man Who Said He Had Danced with Twyla Tharp* states:

Every day I tell myself *Remember*
*somewhere in your heart*
*there must be tenderness.*
what we’ve got to do is try and find it.
What we’ve got to do is find it soon.

Your poetry does that for you. You are in poetry what Graham Swift or Peter Ackroyd are in the novel: a passionate seeker of feeling. Are you happy with the way literary criticism has perceived you? What kind of criticism do you favour? Dry and scientific or compassionate and impressionistic?

**SH**. There is a taboo on tenderness, it seems to me... (It is so difficult to write about well, so easy to write about badly... that’s the trouble). If I could talk about things, nicely and plainly and clearly, in a normal friendly way, like other people seem to do, I wouldn’t need to write poetry, would I!?..

**LV**. *Violet* is written in the first person, *Bunny* in the third. Not that the distance or closeness matters. Your volcanic sensibility is the same, whatever person you use. It just made me wonder who the lodger was and what the story which I can guess but not know for sure actually was. Would you be willing to say more than your poems about it?

**SH**. After I finished *Violet* I thought 'Good, now I can write the nice good-natured happy poems of the nice good-natured, happy person that I am', but *Bunny* seemed to stubbornly press on beyond the point where *Violet* turned back. It got darker, grimmer. I had the sense of a large animal in my backyard I was secretly feeding, and being bullied by. Half love, half fear.

**LV**. *Portrait of My Lover As a Horse*, written in the first person again, has on its cover a photograph after Neil Astley. Is he the same Neil Astley of Bloodaxe Books? Is it a painting? How come there is no actual poem of your lover as a horse in the whole book?

**SH**. No poem called *Portrait of My Lover As a Horse* because I cut it out. For fun. (Also to tease critics – I don't like the idea of 'the title poem'. No poem better than another poem...) Like Mike Leigh's play *Abigail's Party* – there was no party.

**LV**. If you could start your life and career all over again, would you still choose poetry? What would you do differently?

**SH**. Nothing.

**LV**. Who are the poets you like?

**SH**. Everyone.

**LV**. What poets of previous generations have influenced you?

**SH**. Swimmers, divers, Romanians, monks, fish, babies – God's poets everywhere!

November 13, 2002

## Mimi Khalvati, *Displacement is at the heart of my work*

Interview with **MIMI KHALVATI** (born 28 April 1944), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** Writing about Desperado writers, I noticed that a major feature was displacement. You illustrate it yourself. Born in Tehran, educated in Switzerland and London, coming from the theatre to poetry, founding the Theatre in Exile group are ample proof. Displacement gives you more than your nationality, it gives you an acceptance of the whole world. In A*manuensis* I find these lines: 'the tree/ holding the sky in its arms, the earth/ in its bowels.' Do you feel that way yourself? A citizen of everywhere and a poet for all languages of the world?

**MIMI KHALVATI:** I doubt whether anyone these days can feel like a citizen of everywhere – I am a British citizen but, after a recent visit to the States and, like thousands of others born in so-called 'rogue states', having been interrogated, fingerprinted, photographed and placed on the INS register, I realise that citizenship is no protection and language equally suspect. I hesitate even with the disclaimer 'so-called' to use the epithet 'rogue states', knowing that disclaimers are soon dropped, and that anything once named assumes an existence. But yes, displacement is at the heart of my work, though even there, the word itself implies a not-belongingness, a something being not quite right, not in its right place. However, in the lyrical space of poetry, I do feel that everything connects with everything, that there is a permeable sense to the air, that in the very smallest atoms of existence is a kind of unknowable knowledge we might call God. And that we all long to go back to where we do belong.

**LV**. A Desperado poet is, among many other things, a trend of his own. Desperadoes, I keep repeating this, are only similar in their dissimilarity. With some of them, not many, one can find a small biographical detail here and there, just enough to give a narrative coherence to a volume and make the texts warmer. Here is a personal touch in your poem *The Waiting House*:

...you will give me your dreams
and I will give you mine and dreaming still your blood
will live, as mine in yours, in mine.

I find it appealing when a poet allows me into his or her own real life. Do you think biography makes or mars poetry?

**MK**. I think it is inextricably linked. And often, essential. Or at least, essential to a reading of the poet's intentions or revealing of the work in a way that perhaps the writer herself is unaware of. But biographical information needn't be in the body of the poems and, if it is, it's only one way in which a poem can invite the reader in to intimacy and warmth. And of course it can be equally repelling

**LV**. The following lines in *Rice* may not be about yourself, but they describe a mesmerizing existence anyway:

They have granted me asylum. I write plays.
A friend I love in London has hung the Kurdish mules I brought her
on the same hook as an old sitar she never plays.
When she dusts them she thinks of me, and of rivers.

Would you be willing to tell your readers more about your life? Your family, your exile, your education, how poetry happened to you?

**MK**. This poem is in the voice of a very old Iranian friend of mine who has found political asylum in Germany and the 'friend' he mentions is me. But I am very fuzzy about my own biography, except in the broadest outlines. I was born in Tehran, sent to England to a boarding school on the Isle of Wight when I was six and spent the holidays at holiday homes for foreign children or staying with other people's families. I didn't return to Tehran and my own family till I was 13, for a summer holiday. In the interim, of course, I forgot my first language and relearned it when I went to live in Tehran in my late teens. I still can't read and write Persian. My family, typical of so many Iranians, are here and there and everywhere. My mother lives in Baker Street. I have two children of my own, my son lives with me, and my daughter has a two-year-old daughter by a Palestinian father. Sometimes I see my half-sisters and brother in America. Many relatives, few sightings.

I came to writing poetry late, in my forties, and accidentally. I never intended to be a writer – probably on the basis that I didn't think I had much to say and certainly couldn't tell stories. Also, it seemed quite lonesome. But I have always been quite a passive person and go with the wind. So when poetry came my way – on an Arvon course – I happily discovered that the lyric welcomes these very qualities: passivity, bad memory, no feel for narrative but a keen nose for the wind. And it is good company.

**LV**. Many of your poems are tortuous narratives, following the stream of consciousness pattern, invoking (real or unreal?) memories. They have an air of intimacy and a

fairy-tale fragrance. Do you feel any literary trend in particular has influenced you? Would you be prepared to acknowledge allegiance to any literary movement? Whom do you think you belong with, as a poet?

**MK**. I first took courage from the American feminist poets of the 70s – Rich, Morgan, Hacker, Lorde. They made me feel I did have something to say, and gave me permission to write personal, domestic poems. Because my reading has been hotch-potch, it's hard for me to draw a coherent line of influence. Many, many poets I have read, loved and admired. Some have had a more direct bearing on the way I write, or wrote at the time and have taught me particular stratagems. From Wallace Stevens, I found the audacity to try to *think* in poetry; from Jorie Graham, the dance of lineation, the precision of scoring the music; from Louise Gluck, the challenge of letting go of the image and pointing the moral; from Ashbery, the delight of nonchalance – daring to 'write about nothing'; from Dickinson, Frost, Rumi, the joy of putting truth in a nutshell and from Calvino, the pursuit of lightness and speed. But the writers who have stayed with me, got into my blood as it were, are Wordsworth, Proust and Virginia Woolf – two prose writers ironically. And how small one feels, naming these.

**LV**. George Szirtes, Fleur Adcock and Peter Porter come to mind when I think of contemporary displaced poets. In *Entries on Light* you write:

How could we help
having loved elsewhere too much
and I don't mean other lovers
but homelands, other cultures
pulling oceans in their wake?

How did you come to choose England? You fit so well in the landscape of English poetry. Were you familiar with it at an early stage? Was English a mother tongue alongside Arabic? If not, is it easy to be a poet in a later acquired idiom?

**MK**. Thank you so much for saying I fit well into the landscape of English poetry. Music to my ears! That is so much where I feel I fit. And it's rare for me, when so much of my context is 'other', to be seen as sitting, not in a Persian courtyard, but in the middle of an English field. English fields were the background to my childhood on the Isle of Wight. They were also the first landscape I associate with poetry – hearing our English teacher, Aubrey de Selincourt, read the Romantics to us on the downs or in the school grounds. English was the first language I learned to read in and the only language I could speak between the ages of about seven to twenty-something. But being a kind of raft of survival for me, I never learned to take that language for granted. I have always felt I need to use it well, almost to earn

it. This is partly because native speakers are reluctant to allow you to own their language if you are not born to it; and however well you use it, people don't necessarily trust what they hear: a kind of linguistic nationalism gets in the way and, despite the evidence of their own ears, audiences will hear an accent that isn't there, critics will assume allegiances you don't bear and you yourself become defensive. And, although I feel only at home in English, it is an English not rooted in any particular ground, it has no regional loyalties, which makes it poorer in one sense, but perhaps less prone to being parochial.

**LV**. Literature seems to be a form of freedom for you, as the following poem shows:

This book is a seagull whose wings
    you hold, reading journeys between
its feathers. It flutters, dazzles.
    Sings cleanly in shade. Sharpens
your ears to journeys life's taken
    that scraping of a mudguard, tinkling
of stays. Its spine has halved the sun.
    Sun fired it with a nimbus.
A wheelchair passes, crunching on shingle.
    This book, set off by wind, makes you
long for the world, to take lungfuls
    of pleasure, save scraps on quick raids.
So that sated, you turn, blot out the world
    enter another, settle for words.

Is 'settle for words' what you are doing? Is acting your first love, then?

**MK**. You could say that directing (not acting, which I always hated) was my first love, superseded by my second love, poetry. But in the poem here, in referring to 'the world', I was thinking of 'living' as the primary act, and writing, the secondary. I think a lot of writers are torn between the two – there doesn't seem to be enough time for both, but if you don't live life fully, how can you write, if you don't dedicate your life to writing, how can you be a poet? I am also worried about the scavenging aspect of writing: how can you preserve the purity of experience, when somewhere at the back of your mind, you think it might lead to a poem? Doesn't that contaminate, pre-empt even, the poetry? And yet reading, writing, are themselves most wonderful parts of living, and good books make you want to live life more.

**LV**. Each poem of yours is a small play with a background. Just as you say,

I'm opening
　　the door of shadow
on a page. In the doorway
　　stands a poem...

The poem comes out of night, then, the night during which you dream of what is not England in the least. What do you dream of? What do you expect your poetry to reveal? Or is it to alleviate?

**MK**. In the last few years, I have dreamt a lot about my two children, when they were both little. Horrible nightmares. Because they have both suffered serious illness in their twenties and I feel helpless, and responsible, and in my dreams I think I try to locate blame and guilt. I also have horrible dreams about the men in my life! For different reasons. Or, on second thoughts, perhaps they are about blame and guilt too, and abandonment, indifference, exclusion.

I expect my poetry to reveal itself, is all I can say. I hope a poem will reveal itself to me, out of the dark, out of the night, out of the shadow I cast upon it. And I hope that if it does, that sense of discovery, surprise, revelation maybe, will be shared by the reader. Perhaps I hope for no more than to prove that revelation is possible, however small, wherever we look, and that it is contingent upon love.

**LV**. Not all poems are dramatic. Some are engaging watercolours, such as the following:

With finest needles
　　finest beads
lawn and dew are making
　　a tapestry of water...

You write here with your sensibility. There are other poems written with your nostalgia, love of the stage or sharp thought. Which is your favorite way of writing, with the mind or with the soul?

**MK**. I love most ways of writing. I don't expect to use them all, consistently, within each poem. I think of each poem as a small unit in a body of work which, over time, will change and develop and at the end, represent something. I'm not concerned with what that something is. It seems to me a larger version of the mystery you face when you start to

write a poem. But I think each poem has its own palette, music, form, and my job is to be flexible and versatile enough to provide the body it needs through which the mind or soul might speak.

**LV**. Tenderness is a forte with you. This poem proves it:

Curling her tail
          and staring
not quite sure who
          I was
how many kittens
          I too had had, stalking
past as disdainfully
          as blackness
smallness
          warrants, this
is what she
          left me with:
curvature
          and silence.

It made me remember a forceful writer, Doris Lessing, who only has tenderness when it comes to cats (I have recently read her *Ben, in the World*). You, on the other hand, have tenderness to spare. You are an affectionate writer who is not afraid her strength will be impaired if she shows she is weak. You write a strong poetry about frailty. Would that definition be acceptable to you as you see yourself?

**MK**. Yes, thank you, that's a lovely way to be seen. I do see tenderness as a strength, rather than a frailty. Many of the qualities we consider weak or feminine, I do see as strong and infinitely desirable. My politics rests on that hopeless desire – to reverse our values, to feminise relationships. And that is also my frailty.

**LV**. Love is an intense experience in your poems. You focus on the pain rather than the ecstasy of experience:

'Darling, your message on the phone
          made me cry. I phoned you back

to let you hear the tears
in my voice but your phone
was engaged. On second thoughts
I'll write you this with
tears gone from my eyes and cloud
like smoke from smokestacks
moving across a lining of blue
that is our sky, that no matter
how clouds cross, yes, my smoke rises
— I'm not smoking now –
we've always known lies behind them
as the heart and breath behind
your vowels – such a long ah
in darling! – as tears behind these
words, not sad tears nor tears
to lay on you, but dried tears to
*'open the eyes of the heart'*
as they say back home – and this is
back home – to beginnings we always
dreamed of, now lay a claim to
not knowing if dreams come true.
I'd thank you but *'it hasn't a thankyou'*
and I haven't words large and clean
enough – the phone's ringing now...
it wasn't you . . . and this sentence
if I go on like this is never
going to end as you aren't with me
nor I with you. I wish I could slice
that bit of the tape and keep it forever
but neither you nor I know how to.'

Your naturalness is partly due to the clarity of you style. You do not torture words. Sometimes you experiment with rhyme and punctuation, though. What do you think of those poets who forget about life and focus on the page just for the sake of playing with words?

**MK**. I think playing with words is part of the process of discovering the life of the poem. And the moment of your own life that brought it into being. Playing is joyful but, like any game, requires a lot of practice and skill. When a poem looks dead on the page, it is sometimes because the hand that plays is just fiddling, not playing with the arm, the spine, the whole of one's being. When something is done unsuccessfully, the temptation is to ditch the attempt and try something easier where the chance of success is higher: I think in poetry this is often applied to, for example, the use of full rhyme, sustained metaphor, fixed forms and difficult conceits. And poetry is a game with two players – the writer and reader – whose roles are interchangeable and must be played with equal skill.

**LV**. A poem calls English 'foster-tongue', 'fairy godmother.' The space of your childhood obviously means much to your poetry. Actually you build many poems on memories of vague beginnings, turned magic by absence now. Where do you feel at home? Tehran – London, stage – poem?

**MK**. I haven't been to Tehran since 1986 and, in that time, the Tehran I knew has vanished. Most of the years I've lived in London have been in north London, but about nine years ago I moved to Hackney, which still seems new and odd to me. I feel most at home, either with people I love, or – at the risk of sounding mystical! – in a more unearthly space somewhere above my head, where a kind of ancestry or memory seems to live – I don't mean memory of the past, but of a continuum outside the bounds of history.

**LV**. *Entries on Light* is a remarkable volume. You love light, you say. I can also feel in every poem a nightful of sorrow, of fear suppressed. Is that wrong? What sets the clock of your poetry ticking if not this hidden wound?

**MK**. Yes, there is always the hidden face. The light implies darkness, the wound implies healing. Unless I have a sense of beauty, something that makes my heart beat even a little bit quicker, I have no impulse to write. And the hidden face of beauty is sorrow, I guess, the loss and the keeping.

**LV**. You write clearly, forcefully, unafraid of the word or of revealing its burden of true emotion, unafraid to be autobiographical. These are a few of the strong points of your poetry. Lots of poets today run away from autobiographical hints, chasing personae, using masks, speaking for somebody else. Your lyricism is intensely personal. Do you believe poetry should be personal? Eliot wrote and wrote about the impersonality of poetry but ended

up in an inferno of boiling personal passions. I for one rejoice at any narrative thread in poetry that relies on the poet's true self. How about you?

**MK**. I write the way I do because it's the only way I can write. I feel quite limited, but relatively happy in my limitations. For a lot of women writers, the use of the 'I' feels both natural, inescapable and constrictive. I confine myself to the lyric and am trying to move closer to song. Song can transcend the limitations of the more autobiographical 'I' and make it sound like everybody's singing it. I feel there is room for all kinds of poetry and particularly enjoy poetry unlike mine, in that it stretches me.

**LV**. Your rhymes are resourceful when you choose to use them, but many poems rely mainly on an inner rhythm of the soul, of sensibility. The music of your poetry is not a shocking but a soothing one. What do you think of poems that rhyme half a word with a preposition, a pronoun with a conjunction, just for the sake of amazing lovers of words? What is more important to you, the word or the beyond-the-word?

**MK**. Since, in my more formal last collection *The Chine*, I do sometimes do precisely those things, perhaps I should defend them! The thing is, I think the crucial difference is between good poetry and not-so-good poetry, rather than between formal and free verse, or between classically formal verse and a more contemporary approach to metre and rhyme. I also believe that virtuosity can be a joy in itself, to reader and writer, and that true virtuosity creates not just outward show but, as you say, 'an inner rhythm of the soul'. I am unhappy about either/or choices; the question for me is always 'does it really work?', 'is it true poetry?' The music is paramount and I agree that the sound of my poems is soothing, soporific even, and I would love to be able to capture more contrapuntal, jazzy rhythms, but I have a naive ear for melody and the singing line.

**LV**. Are you happy with what critics have written about your poems? What kind of criticism do you prefer? There are clear critics on the one hand and scientific critics on the other. Some – very few – are capable of being both. Which would you be, if you had a choice?

**MK**. On the whole, I have been lucky with some good reviews and am always grateful, and touched, when someone reimagines the work and gives it time and thought. Occasionally, because of my own self-misrepresentation, critics have made assumptions that have placed me outside the milieu where I feel I belong. And this is partly because we are anxious about issues of inclusion and ethnicity, and the further away a culture is from our own, the less we appreciate the shades of difference within that culture, or hovering on its edges. Looking from here towards Iran, I think most western people see a dark mass of people, among them hordes of black chadors, and the sound that rises from those

people is heavy and harsh. But I see only pastels, dust and turquoise, mountain skies and in them, hear the sound of sitars! Nostalgia is, to an English sensibility, something lightweight, sentimental, that denies the present realities of our lives. To a poet like Mahmoud Darwish, it is the very condition of life. To me, an ideal critic is one who stands looking in the same direction as the poet, before looking back along the written lines. That said, I also appreciate the one who focusses on language rather than biography or subject matter, and who trusts the evidence of their own eyes.

**LV**. Do you find interviews useful? From your experience, how well do they manage to reach the audience and how much can they explain that is not already in the poems? Is an internet site a good idea, do you think, as far as a communication between poets and students of poetry, or just among poets, is concerned?

**MK**. I think internet sites are wonderfully useful and informative and can provide poets with a huge platform normally impossible to find. Interviews are invaluable, too, in that they give us an opportunity to stop and think about who and where we are. It is still important for poets to try and create the taste by which they are read, to correct misapprehensions, and to communicate outside the world of the poem. Those who have done so, in interviews, essays, articles, have paved the way for their poems to be read in the best possible light.

**LV**. Is there a particular question that you would have liked to have been asked by interviewers so far, yet never have been?

**MK**. I think you have covered all of them, Lidia! And would like to thank you for reading my work so carefully, so generously, and for giving me this opportunity for dialogue.

**LV**. If you were to start all over again, would you still choose exile and poetry?

**MK**. Well, as I said, I fell into both, one as a child, the other as a woman in her forties. Perhaps the things we feel most tender towards are themselves the most tender parts of us and, given another chance, we would still choose to have them, whatever their frailties.

February 23, 2003

## Wayne Lanter, *I don't know where I fit, or if I fit at all*

Interview with **WAYNE LANTER** (born 1937), American poet and editor

**LIDIA VIANU:** Your poems abound in short narratives, and the long poem *At Float on the Ohta-gawa* is a lyrical novel, a new genre, I should say. During the stream of consciousness, it was lyricism that flooded fiction. I have a feeling fiction is overwhelming lyricism for Desperadoes (writers after 1950). Do you value the narrative in your poems?

**WAYNE LANTER:** For a very long time now I have suspected that all literature is narrative—even lyric poetry. The first literature, songs, ballads, epics, coming from the first human impulse to share a view of the world, was narrative. Certainly drama is, and fiction—maybe even sermons and eulogies. It is possible to think of philosophical essays as stories where ideas serve as characters, themes as plots, etc. I don't think there's much doubt that Plato's dialogues are basically moral, political and/or social stories. Even art (painting and sculpting) and music, it would seem to me, is narrative, to a point. For my part, I look for story lines, the logic and alignment of certain events, actions following one another, or ideas flowing from one another for my poems. At least in longer poems, it would seem to me, some sort of narrative is essential. After all, poets want to be read. And narrative is a reading guide, a device that makes reading a bit easier, and more interesting.

**LV.** Which do you enjoy writing more, fiction or poetry?

**WL.** Well, I spent, and still do spend a good bit of time writing fiction, and some of it has been mildly successful. But by nature and inclination I prefer the rigors and dogged work of poetry. I'm a bit like Borges. When asked why he wrote mostly short pieces, he said there were just too many interruptions in modern life. The doorbell or phone is always ringing. We have to spend too much time taking care of ourselves. Technology hasn't saved us from that. In fact modern technology is designed to eat up time and keep people busy serving it. On the other hand, I do enjoy writing and working on prose, when I have the time.

**LV.** Are you deliberately trying to prove hybridization of literary genres can create new categories, or, at least, do you agree to this attempt theoretically, when you talk about your poetry?

**WL.** When I sit down to write a poem I have an idea in mind, what I might call a metaphor, usually, and spend the first bit of time trying to find a way to approach the material. Each idea has its own peculiar requirements—things such as tone and diction and length of lines. Karl Shapiro said that 'God gives you the first line, and the rest is up to you.' Well, maybe not God, but some thing that catches the eye and mind, some paradox or irony, some double entendre that offers a possibility, something that can be exploited poetically. Occasionally I loosen up the lines so the cadence and casual quality of the ideas read more like prose than poetry. Sometimes the verses, and certainly the sections of the longer poems, come very close to being chapters. But I'm not consciously out to hybridize literary genres. If it happens, well, that's all right. I'm sure new genres will be created, if we can find places and times where they might be presented – places where they might make sense enough for people to accept them. But if I cross breed genres, it's not because I'm promoting a theory, but mostly because that's the way I write. And since I'm different from all other people, as they are different from me, I suspect I cannot do what others have done or will do. In that sense all poets, all writers are unique. And so, I suspect, what they write is also unique.

**LV.** Reading your poems is sometimes like a puzzle which could be called, 'Find the full stop.' You begin, in your first volume, *The Waiting Room*, by using punctuation and capitals, but you slowly lose them as you continue with more volumes. Is this fusion of one meaning with the next a new poetic diction?

**WL.** I don't know. Although I haven't given it much thought, the idea (practice) came from W. S. Merwin and from talking to John Knoepfle, who wants to write poems that can be received on paper in the same way, say, a fifteenth century sermon was received in church—a melting of the oral and the literate. No capitalization, no punctuation—so the listener/reader is required to create phrases and sentences of meaning. It's a wonderful poetic device. I can write a phrase, then use several words from the end of the phrase as the beginning of the next phrase—sort of an overlapping of words and meaning. That way the words have two, and sometimes three or more meanings or associations. Each word carries a greater weight. Then, too, the poem is dominated by line breaks instead of by sentences. Since there is no punctuation, the reader (can) needs to create the sense of what is written, within a large, but still limited context. I do this because it is second nature to my thinking and because it's fun. I sometimes worry, however, that in *At Float* I overdid it. Maybe in a poem that long it interferes with the fluidity and makes reading too difficult. Steve Thomas, a carpenter-poet friend of mine read *At Float* and observed 'I see, no seams.' Another friend pointed out that the language in *At Float* is something like writing English in Japanese. The words are more like characters than words.

**LV.** *Canonical Hours* is a peculiar volume. It brings a special form of suspense to poetry: it is the search for meaning. Those poems require a new way of reading, which is as full of suspense as the text. Reading your poetry, on the whole, is an experience full of suspense. The reader runs breathlessly between predicates, filling in the full stops, connecting

ideas. Your ideas become thus his ideas. What is your attitude to this new reader you educate in the spirit of assuming the text and adapting it to his own sensibility?

**WL.** Well, if the world is not more complex than it was in the past, at least we know enough to have a better appreciation of the complexity, and surely a deeper awareness of just how flawed our perceptual apparatus really is. Nothing is what it looks like. That’s the tale told to us by twentieth century science and philosophy. So we need to pause at every turn to reconsider, and that’s what I want the reader to do in *Canonical Hours.* Of course readers are already familiar with the process. Good readers read everything. They read the sky, the night, the wind. And they know that whatever they think about what they have read, they are, at best, only partially correct. They already understand that the senses are unreliable, that consciousness is an uncharted mine field. That’s why they read.

**LV.** A new kind of expressivity?

**WL.** Yes, perhaps, a new expressivity, or maybe an old way of communicating committed to paper—maybe closer to the way we talk. We seldom speak in sentences, even the most literate of us. Who was it? Gertrude Stein said F. Scott Fitzgerald was the only person she ever met who thought in sentences.

**LV.** Or just a deliberate game, to keep the reader alert and make him feel like a creator himself?

**WL.** Yes, that too. Reading is a creative activity, decoding so to speak. Merwin reminds us that to read a poem properly we simply have to take the time to stop and read it. Maybe the way archeologists read hieroglyphics. Maybe this enhances that. Maybe this requires a bit more attention from the reader. After all, not everything in life is a cartoon strip.

**LV.** You are a miser when it comes to using epithets, metaphors, the paraphernalia of traditional poems. Yet you do create a strong sense of atmosphere and your images are intense. Is this over-simplification of poetry, or complication, if we think that the reader has to cut out each meaning carefully from the next, a feature you create on your own?

**WL.** Well, I’m from the Midwest and it has been the (American) Midwestern tradition to take literature from the land, and only in passing from other literature. An overabundant use of classical allusions seems to me a bit incestuous. I can appreciate Dante and Shakespeare and Milton, but not every thing needs to be described or composed with reference to poets past, or to other works of art. That’s all a little too self-conscious for me. It’s also too academic. It’s as if the poet is writing with a vision of students running off to Poetry Appreciation 101 with their dictionaries in hand prepared to

explicate his poem and discover its *true* meaning. On the other hand there is still a strong aversion in American poetry (some of it) to the Romantic impulse and the tropes and figures of speech it heralded. In other words, there are a lot of different ways to write. As you say, I use metaphors, but sparingly. There is in the cold hard images of the material world a kind of natural metaphor. In fact one of my interests has been the physics of the twentieth century where reality, the material world, as you go into it, into inner space, or outward into space, is in some very real ways metaphorical. When you get far enough in, the material world vanishes from the senses and slips into metaphor.

Anyway, when we look at the material world we distinguish one thing from another. Then we interpret it for ourselves and for others. I've always thought intelligence should be defined as the ability to distinguish and compare. When asked what the Jesuits taught him Joyce was reported to have replied, 'to order and to judge.' Maybe that's what intelligence is. Maybe the more intelligent among us are just looking at the world more closely and making (ordering and judging) the links we have difficulty seeing. I certainly wouldn't think of it as simplification, since trying to see what is really there is damned hard work. Damned hard complicated work. In the USA during the last few years we have heard a great deal about the computer revolution and the Information Highway. Well, I tell people that if they really want to get on the information highway all they have to do is take a telescope and a microscope out into their backyard and look around. Take a close look at the grass and trees, the stars. Then try to understand what is seen.

**LV.** Do you feel you belong to a larger group of poets who do (approximately, since every Desperado is his own trend) the same thing?

**WL.** There are poets I admire and there are poems, especially poems, I wish I had had the insight and talent and skill to write. It is important for all of us, whatever we do, to compare ourselves with the best—the best as we see the best. But I'm not sure there is any larger group to identify with. Sometimes I think my language groups me with a lot of other American Midwestern writers. Twain, Hemingway, Anderson, Masters, Lindsay, Hearst, Knoepfle, Justice, Dacey, and even Sandburg. But that may have to do with the farm land and coal mines and rivers in the Midwest, looking out across the prairie, twenty or thirty miles, watching a sunset or seeing a storm coming in, and not much to do with what we are talking about. So I don't know where I fit, or if I fit at all.

**LV.** Would you like to be grouped with other poets?

**WL.** Not especially. I've never been much for joining or wanting the solidarity and/or identity of group membership. That may be too confining. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your view, we are caught in the trap of our own skin, and there's no chance of getting out. I'd agree with Wittgenstein on that. Belonging to a group, seems to me,

another fantasy meant to delude the self and to avoid the obvious. Since I have no political agenda, no paradigm or scheme to promote, I am better served not wanting to match up with other writers or to be grouped with other poets. What happens after I'm done—well, that's someone else's business.

**LV.** Who are your models?

**WL.** That depends on what I'm writing, when I'm reading. Maybe Richard Hugo, Philip Levine, Donald Justice, James Dickey, W. S. Merwin, John Knoepfle and then British and Australian poets. James Fenton, Carol Ann Duffy, Clive James, Peter Porter, and the Irish, Heaney, Mahon, Cairin Carson, Muldoon. Then, too, Derek Walcott. There are numerous others. Joseph Brodsky, Philip Larkin, Howard Nemerov, Adrienne Rich. And as I said before, poems, very wonderfully written poems.

**LV.** Is it your impression that you could be similar to any of them or of your contemporaries (considering that the main Desperado feature is being dissimilar to everybody else)?

**WL.** Probably not. I'm not out to break a mold, worrying about not looking like those who came before me—and there's an awful lot of that nonsense going on in contemporary poetry—or to start a new school, to be on the cutting edge, so to speak—which usually means messing around with form, and actually going back to the idea of a century or so ago that good poetry is a matter of writing neat forms, whether it has meaning or not—since I am only intent on describing the world and the difficulty humans have in that world, I may or may not be similar to other poets. Still, I suspect, someone else will have to talk about that.

Then to answer your question, I suppose, if we push the generalities far enough I could be similar to some of these poets. There is something of the working class in my poetry, say as there is in Levine—something of place as in John Knoepfle. And so on.

**LV.** Your poems are burdens. The reader has to be prepared to carry a hulk of life when he reads. You never write empty words. Your narratives are a way of loading poetry with experience. The word seems crystal clear and innocent, but is explosive, has a hidden cargo of soul. Is the intensity of your poetry a deliberate aim, or is it just inherent to writing, not planned?

**WL.** What is planned? That specific observation? Probably not. I try to find images, symbols that fit what I have in mind, to get the reader to see and to understand. I realize that this, the use of objects or things the reader can hear, see, smell or touch, rather than abstractions, creates a vivid reading experience, an intensity, and therefore, as you say, a

burden. And while I'm a Platonist in that, I'm always certain there is another level of meaning beyond or behind, sheltered in the shell of what the senses can gather in, I don't think a poet should, or can, responsibly begin there. Abstractions, in and of themselves, too easily give way to fantasy, give over the responsibility of what the writer has to say, or can create, to the reader. Good sensual images direct thinking a bit more. Not every whim of the reader's mind is art. Also, if the experiences I write are good enough, if they have a universal validity, then the poems will be intense. Of course, I could cover the intensity with bantering or humor, but for me that would be dishonest and misleading. There's nothing humorous in loss. I'd rather stay with a straight-forward presentation. I think that gives poetry a powerful simplicity. And a simple power.

**LV.** Your poems, most poems, have characters. Actually, you are the master of what could be called the character-poem. Do you think these characters become a coherent plot in a volume, or are they meant to be left disparate, perceived as unrelated experiences?

**WL.** Yes, a little of both. They are disparate in their experiences, in the content, the conditions of the experience, but tied together in the web of my mind and the more obsessive preoccupations I have with the world. Sometimes I write a line or two, a paragraph, and put it on my stack of shards and forget about it. Months later, on numerous occasions, I have then written the same line or paragraph, only sometime later to find the first, to discover that I have already written out this particular idea. I tend to think about the same problems year after year. Or without being too reductionistic, the same problem. Since human life is primarily a process, and man is trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to prolong his position in the process, it seems to me most of what we deal with most of the time is loss.

In truth I do not much care what people think or feel, as long as they do not act on it. The only way we can know what another has in mind is by some communicative act—maybe a word, a touch a pose, etc. At that point, at the moment of act, our inner drives, for good or for bad, become important to the world. The actions of narratives are the energy fields with which characters surround themselves, sometimes harming those who stumble into the danger zone, sometimes harmed themselves by wandering into the energy fields of others.

**LV.** Do you have the feeling that each of your volumes is a plot in itself, a veiled novel of sorts, which partly captures the readers' interest by narrative devices?

**WL.** That could be. Certainly each volume is a record of the times during which it was written—a record of my thinking at that time. Yes, by using narrative devices. That's a good observation. *The Waiting Room* was early, simple, very straight-forward narration, sort of a collection of stories (certainly linked in my mind and within the time I lived them) during the years I was writing it. *At Float* was a nightmare, maybe a missed memory, events I should have

understood better, earlier, a story that had to be recreated both in conception and in writing. Yes, both books are stories in and of themselves. Again, there is a unifying theme, a point of view, maybe even a plot in each of the books, and in that a story. In some poems I feature images or characters that appear in other poems. Omar Wilson from 'The Moon at the Edge of Grandfather's Farm' is the son from 'Grandma Wilson.' *Threshing Time* is in large the interview with James Hearst. But one poet read it and said 'My God, they should make a movie out of that.' I guess she found a story in there some place.

**LV**. The narrative kernels you choose involve a sympathetic approach on your part. 'Death in a Polish Woods,' is a remarkable lyrical version of a deeply impressive, tragic story. You are not a joker, you do not play with words (but you do play upon them), your view of life is stern. A Desperado intensely dislikes being told he is getting involved in his narrative, as much as he hates being told he manipulates his reader far worse than any writer before him (and he really does so, with all due respect). You do side with your heroes – lyricism allows you to get very close – and you do point the path for the reader to take. Do you find this natural, artificial, untrue?

**WL.** Faulkner thought good writing had always to do with the verities, not virtue, but the deeper truths of the human heart. And it seems to me that good writers in their best works occupy themselves with these truths. These are the deep-seated drives and principles that make us human, and will always be there as long as we are human, especially when we are put into a difficult situation, one of life and death, or when our self is threatened—when our lives or the lives of innocent others, and our sense of things like honor and courage and pride and sacrifice and justice are threatened.

Certainly I was in sympathy with the German soldier in 'Death in a Polish Woods.' I could hardly have been otherwise. I had been teaching an introductory ethics course and had tried to get the students to understand the Socratic admonition that it is better to suffer a wrong than to do one to another person. I found the story in an ethics textbook about the young German, although I never verified the actual case, and simply took it from there. Yes, I empathize with him, but still tried to stay away from the murky nonsense of sentimentality. You see, there is something extremely powerful in a determined human mind, a mind that sets itself and will not be moved—something enormously admirable. Of course that is if the mind-set is focused on helping people survive or refusing to participate in their demise. In many cases religious mind sets do just the opposite. In 'Death in a Polish Woods' a man was determined not to give in to the slaughter of innocent people, just as the other soldiers and the SS were determined to destroy people. He did not want some day later to have to say, 'I wish I would have,' or 'I should never have.' He made up his mind to die because he did not want to be the kind of person the German military was forcing him to become. Humans have done that for centuries. It's called courage, and he died courageously. A courage that is grounded in his enormous

respect for other humans, innocent humans who were being victimized. And, I should say, a fear for himself—not physically, but for his 'self,' (soul, spirit, psyche)—or however you want to characterize it. For a very real moment in his life he was an individual who could not be intimidated, not even by certain death. Have I taken his part? Well, yes, I hope so. I'm looking over his shoulder, telling it from his point of view—even in simply creating a dramatic occasion on paper that further exposes his travail and his courageous resolution. Yeh, I'm teaching. Hopefully. But why else write if not to expose and educate, to inculcate? Mine is not an idle, haphazard point of view in face of an uncaring universe. Maybe the universe doesn't give a damn about man. Well, okay, but with or without a god, by god I do care.

**LV.** I am trying hard, as you can see, to apply a label to your nimble writing. Will you allow that to happen? Now? Ever?

**WL.** I'm not sure how to label what I do. Even coming out of the Midwest, as I have said earlier, what I write has more to do with the spirit than the geography of place. I had a mostly unpleasant childhood and very early on got down inside myself, introspectively, and I am still most comfortable in the deeper recesses of spirit. It seems to me a perfectly natural place to conduct business.

Maybe it comes down to what one values most. There are so many ingredients in poetry. One could apply all kinds of labels. But if the labels get stuck on too early, by the time the writing is done, finally, the glue will have cracked and new and different labels will be necessary.

**LV.** You mention Yeats in one poem (*The Churchyard at St. Colmcille*), quote Eliot in another (*St. Joseph's School Mothers Quilting*), and repeatedly mention Frost in *Threshing Time*. What is your relationship with Eliot's poetry, against which your own generation – deliberately or instinctively – rebels?

**WL.** Well, we may have rebelled, but we took very sincere and careful instruction from that from which we chose to rebel. Very little of contemporary American poetry would be possible without Eliot. Or, let me put it this way. Contemporary American poetry would be entirely different if hadn't been for Eliot. In a lot of ways he set the bar. He is the standard. He moved the American/English vernacular in poetry into the twentieth century. He was in the beginning, and still is today, modern man.

Perhaps, after Eliot showed us the way out, we dropped back into the cave, now confident we could have it both ways.

**LV.** I can enumerate a long line of reactions in your poems that run straight against what stream of consciousness poetry (if you accept this label) used to do: you avoid the music of poetry (but find your own, austere music to replace

Eliot's fireworks), you ban the tragic show (but are no less tragic than Eliot), you shun the encoded words (yet make a puzzle whose key you do not offer to the reader). Do you feel any different from Yeats and Eliot? How would you define this difference, if there is one?

**WL.** Good question. I have absorbed a great deal of Yeats and Eliot. I say absorbed because I have to keep going back to them to see what I missed, to reabsorb what they have to offer and what I didn't get the first several hundred times.

The difference is that both Yeats and Eliot are sitting on high stools looking down, and in some ways looking askance at the world below them. They operate at a great moral distance from the pain and suffering, and from the joys and exhilaration of the human experience. Listening to Eliot read, he reminds me of a great ghostly voice, a mythic voice, droning on from his mountain top about the condition of the creatures down in the valley—maybe a town crier, albeit a brilliant and superbly talented town crier, who somehow got into the choir loft at high mass and is given in the great silence of the cathedral to chanting about the charred and warped condition of our souls.

**LV.** One poem is entitled 'Notes on Romania.' No other poem mentions a Romanian experience, but you also write about Hiroshima very intensely and I wonder if you have a Japanese experience. You mention Ceausescu, Suceava, Bucharest, villages, children with AIDS. What is your image of Romania? Does that mean you know my country or anyone that has visited it?

**WL.** That's a very special poem. That day I had been trying to get a class to understand Aquinas' proofs. Trying to get them to understand the problems inherent in believing in or positing an absolute. After the class left, I was standing in the sunlight near a window, chalk covered from an extended session of scratching out proposals and assumptions on the chalkboard, quite weary with my inadequate attempts to elucidate the problems and gain on my students' religious proclivities, when a former student appeared in the doorway. She had been in the Peace Corp in Romania and I had not seen her for several years. We spent the next hour or so talking about her experiences in Suceava. I was already somewhat aware of Ceausescu, from having read about his régime over the years. Later that night I thought about what she had told me and about how we Americans, most Americans, do not trust authority, certainly not absolute authority, and yet long for it. The poem, the sadness of power misused, of people suffering, came out of that.

It is one of the major tragedies of humanity, and I wrote about this extensively in *At Float* and in 'Death in a Polish Woods,' one of the tragedies and an unfortunate paradox that no matter how we try otherwise, the final determinant of existence is physical. No matter how good or how intelligent a person is, it can all be destroyed by killing the person. If in a room of thirty people, one person wants to break the precious vase—there is no way to keep it from getting broken. Eventually it will be broken.

**LV.** Your poem on Hiroshima reminds me of Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and *A Pale View of Hills*, but he *is* Japanese, so I can understand his commitment to the cause. How did you come to know the Japanese spirit so well as to make the reader feel steeped in Japanese spirituality when he reads your volume? Have you ever been to Japan?

**WL.** No, I have never been to Japan. And I suppose it is arrogant to assume an intimate understanding of a country with which I am only incidentally, and even then at a great distance, familiar. But I was not unsympathetic with the Japanese people and their culture. The protagonist in *At Float* is Japanese-American. And I tried to combine the best of both worlds, as I understand it. I was especially sympathetic with the Japanese in America who were sent to concentration camps in the American west.

When I began *At Float*, when I started to think about writing it—1995, the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima—there were articles in many of the popular magazines about the bombing. As it was, I could hardly have avoided them. Of course, one thing led to another and I realized that to understand, or at least to appreciate how the Japanese got into the war and why they didn't get out, and maybe how they were victimized by their own hubris, or tragic flaw, I would need to know a great deal more about the culture. The bibliography for *At Float* ran to well over three hundred books and articles. I was going to publish it with the poem—and may at a later date—but thought the poem itself with a referential glossary would be enough.

The reverence for nature, the idea that man is part of nature, that I found in Shintoism was/is sufficiently removed from the Christian idea of dominating the earth—but very nearly aligned with my own feelings, as well as with those of some of my ancestors who happened to be American Indians. So it was quite easy for me to get into the images of the Tea Ceremony, the rock garden and, of course, the machinations of Stone Monkey. American and European and African folklore are all populated with tricksters of one kind or another. If it all works for the reader, well, that's just good luck.

**LV.** Is Japan an old obsession or a sudden inspiration?

**WL.** Certainly not an obsession—probably a cultivated inspiration. The psychology of belief and what it can produce is pretty much the same the world over. Shintoism has a deep respect for nature and its spirits and is trying to placate the kind of blazing devastation that Oppenheimer and the other American scientists turned loose by splitting the atom. Remember we are not yet done with the plague of the nuclear nightmare—and we may never be.

**LV.** What does it take to write a poem in your opinion?

**WL.** Courage. Love of language, and then hard work. After I've gone through fifty or sixty versions of the poem and have gotten something halfway acceptable—and I look back at all the time, the effort, the changes, the times I thought it was good enough, nearly finished, when it was still raw and crude and illogical, then I sink into despair and fear that I will never do it again. Then I come across an idea and as Lady Macbeth says 'screw courage to the sticking place,' and dig in to try to make the language carry the idea, try to make something out of it.

**LV.** Your poetry is a trap for the naive reader, who thinks he will never be caught in emotion and suddenly finds himself a prisoner of your soul. Avoiding old traps or devising new ones?

**WL.** Maybe using old traps to devise new ones.

**LV.** Since you do not rely on musicality, exquisite imagery, lofty ideas, rejecting the artificial with all your might, could you define your poetic approach?

**WL.** Yeh, we Americans are skeptical about lofty ideas. Ideas of national destiny or talk about wars of epic proportion bother us. We always have the feeling that there must be someone pushing the idea, and seldom for good reasons.

I begin with language. That, for me, is the true difficulty. I work for hours and hours to get the thing to sound right. Sometimes, when it works, I don't know even why it works. But the sound, the cadence, the stress of the syllables has to ring true in my head before I turn it loose. It is an almost impossible task, but once in a while it comes out right. Otherwise, I see the poem as an exercise in sensibilities, and hope mine are sufficiently seasoned and refined. Bad lines in writing come from the barbed edges of the writer's less mature and inexperienced soul.

**LV.** You have written a novel. Where do you draw the line between fiction and poetry?

**WL.** The line would have to be drawn not so much in language usage as in things like action and plot and depth of character. Even then there's a great deal of similarity. Walcott's *Omeros*, for instance, which is an epic (in a loose sense of the definition) narrative, clearly poetry, but with many of the characteristics of fiction. Faulkner and Joyce, on the other hand, have incorporated poetry into their prose, their fiction. Poems sometimes get breezy with narrative and the language loosens up to the point that they look and sound like prose. At *River King* we are in the habit of saying that for a piece of writing to be a poem it must have something of poetry about it. If we think of poetic devices as balls on a billiard table, the more balls in use, the more poetry you have. Of course, the balls can be used poorly or with great effect. That's up to the player.

Then too, mostly fiction is longer than poetry, mostly, and more involved with plot and narrative devices, the tangle of human emotions, beating through the jungle as a whole, while poems deal only with a few vines (I should have said lines) at a time. Poetry takes a closer look. It's more like a magnifying glass. You asked before about crossing lines in *At Float*. I was very interested in character, plot, action—all kinds of things that usually belong to fiction. Still, as always, the quality has to do with how well these elements are integrated and how the writer uses language to integrate them.

If it doesn't, well, you can always try again.

Maybe it would be a good idea to rid ourselves of these categories, since we are always talking about the exception. I have seen brilliant pieces of writing that worked beautifully, although I didn't know how to classify them. Is it poetry or drama, drama or fiction, fiction or poetry? The language of fiction tends to be loose, the language of poetry generally tighter. Now what?

**LV.** The review you have founded, *River King Poetry Supplement*, inherits Eliot's idea in the *Criterion*. Ideas gather and mix, heading for an international status of this very national art of poetry. What is your priority as an editor of this poetry review?

**WL.** I know when I say our priorities at *River King* are to publish the best poetry possible it is a so-far-so-obvious statement. In the beginning we saw no reason to limit *River King* to American poets. I had for a long time been reading English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish and Australian poets and so decided it should be 'English language' poetry. Of course, that would include translations. And, as you know, in the case of your translations of Marin Sorescu we also printed the Romanian text of the poems. We are open to all and any language/translations, provided the English version of the poem is what we might consider 'quality.'

Otherwise, we meant to produce a journal of poetry and short writings about poets and poetry. We do not take ads and do not print reviews. Once in a while we use the 'Al says' column to give our views on the state or condition of the contemporary poetry world (mostly American) as we see it. Although I'm not sure why we shouldn't talk about poetry in other countries, in other languages.

We are especially interested in young writers and those writers who, while not so young, may be beginning their writing careers. I think that is a obligation for a journal like *River King*. Let the big slick mags deal with what I call the Disneyland poets. The glitzy big names. Likewise, we want to cover as much of the spectrum as possible, from the formal to the very, very informal. Many contemporary poetry magazines and journals limit themselves to one kind of poetry. In fact some are so selective that the poems sound as if they have all been written by the same person. Our only criteria is that the poems be well thought out, and well written. But, then, in actuality, good writing is always well thought out.

**LV.** You have published a long interview with James Hearst, whom you knew well. Some writers intensely dislike interviews, they feel they must absolutely look smart and ignore the point of it, which is to offer readers a revelation of what authors do not have another opportunity to say. How do you feel about interviews now, at the end of another one?

**WL.** I have been rather amazed by this one. I should say that interviews, when the questions are penetrating and well-posed, as these questions have been, can be, for the writer, a new way of seeing what he or she has done, and, in this case, what he thinks. *Threshing Time*, which as you noted is a long interview, was actually a series of conversations, in fact, five conversations I had with Jim Hearst over a couple of days in the spring of 1977. When I transcribed the material I was so impressed with what Jim had said, I decided to reduce my part to a minimum. So conversations turned to interviews—which is better.

2000

## David Lodge, *Art must entertain, or give delight*

Interview with **DAVID LODGE** (born 28 January 1935), British novelist and critic

**LIDIA VIANU:** You have written novels that escape into what you call ‘comic’, novels feeding on the reader’s smile and building irony into their plot and characters, as a *sine qua non*. David Lodge could not be conceived of without his irony. But could he be understood if the reader banned lyricism altogether? When we least expect it, there are outbursts of warm insight, embedded in the comic framework, in the ironic mood. Is tenderness one of your weapons, or is it just an undesired effect of a sensibility that sometimes runs uncontrolled? Have you ever written poetry? Novels like *Out of the Shelter, Nice Work, Paradise News*, are the iron fist of irony within the velvet glove of sympathy. Your irony is not cold, but emotional. When you bite, it is done with soft teeth. You are a considerate comic novelist, if you accept this label. How much of your lyricism went into other kinds of writing than the novel?

**DAVID LODGE:** These questions are so closely connected that I will answer them together. Certainly my novels are full of irony, both dramatic irony, and rhetorical irony, which is associated with comedy and satire. But you are right that there is also a softer, more emotionally tender (and some of my critics would say, sentimental) aspect to my work. I don’t see any contradiction in this. One of my great artistic heroes is Dickens who is both ironic and emotional to the point of sentimentality in different aspects of his work. I would not reject the description ‘considerate comic novelist’. ‘Compassionate’ might be a better word. I don’t think I am a savage, misanthropic satirist, and certainly not a tragic writer. In my later work particularly the ironic posture of the implied author towards the story is qualified by a more sympathetic (‘tender’, if you like) attitude towards the characters. *Nice Work* is a kind of transitional novel in that respect. The opening chapters take a very ironic, authorially mediated view of the two principal characters. But as the novel develops, the characters take over the novel, they become more rounded and sympathetic, and they change as a result of their interaction, while the authorial voice becomes less overt. *Changing Places* and *Small World* were generically conceived as ‘comic novels’ – comedy dominates the structure and texture of both, and licences a certain element of caricature in the characterisation and of farce in the action. *Nice Work* and its successors have comic elements, but I wouldn’t describe them as comic novels. They are just novels, literary novels. I’m not quite sure what you mean by lyricism, but lyric is first-person discourse, and I have used first person narration a lot in my last three novels (including the forthcoming *Thinks…)* perhaps in order to deal with the ‘tender’ emotions associated with love

and death. Like most people with literary interests I wrote some poetry when I was very young, but I have only written a handful of poems in adult life, and none for many years now.

**LV**. What is your idea of the ideal ending for a novel? You smash the old happy end, the happy couple living happily ever after. The stream of consciousness writers did the same. The difference is you do not do that solely as an innovating trick. You actually see life that way, inconclusive and forever to be continued. How do you decide when a novel should end?

**DL**. This question links up with the preceding two, because how you end a story crucially affects the impression it leaves on the reader about the implied author's attitude to life. I am fascinated by this question of endings, and have written about it in several critical essays. As modern literary novelists go, I think I am more drawn than most to the old-fashioned 'happy ending', and have sometimes been criticised for it, though you don't seem to agree. I tend to leave my characters in an open-ended situation, but a hopeful one, with the major problems they have confronted in the story resolved. This resolution of the issues raised by the narrative is a constant preoccupation while writing the novel for me. I always have a provisional idea of how the story is going to end, but usually this is modified as the composition of the work proceeds. This is because there are so many 'codes' involved in writing a novel – the codes of narrative coherence, psychological plausibility, thematic significance, formal elegance, etc. etc. and the ending must satisfy on all these levels. Also, you discover so much of what you want to say in the process of writing.

**LV**. One of your characters in *The Picturegoers* (1960), Harry, touches upon the major issue of teenage violence, which was the concern of Lessing, Burgess, Golding and others. You do not write about this again. It is a dystopic interest that might characterize a Desperado. Is the issue important to you?

**DL**. *The Picturegoers* is a very early, immature novel, and reflects the influence Graham Greene had on me at that time. Harry is somewhat derivative from the character of Pinkie, the teenage gangster in Greene's *Brighton Rock*. He is not really based on experience or observation. I have never been much drawn to the depiction of violent or psychopathic behaviour, like the writers you mention, for temperamental reasons touched on above.

**LV**. In *Ginger, You're Barmy* (1962), another kind of violence, the political one, caused by the IRA, is woven in the relaxed irony of the plot. You undermine the idea of positive hero, placing the bad student who ruins his life on a pedestal. The traditional pattern of the novel seems deliberately forced to turn upside down. Is it more important to you

to smash known patterns with irony, or to sound an earnest alarm? Are you ironical before anything else, or alongside with an interest in politics, problems of religious belief?

**DL**. *Ginger* is another novel written under the influence of Greene. It has a similar structure to that of *The Quiet American.* I wanted to write a novel that would sum up the institution of National Service (i.e. two years' compulsory military service for young men) as I experienced it, not long before it was abolished in Britain because it had ceased to serve any useful purpose. My own response shifted from a shocked resistance to the military ethos (I declined to try for an officer's commission in Basic Training) to pragmatic resignation and a determination to make life as comfortable as possible for myself. I developed these two responses into two separate characters and contrasted their fortunes. I suppose the novel reflects my own aversion to risky, romantic gestures, but also a certain grudging admiration for those who make them. Like Fowler in *The Quiet American* Jonathan has 'won' in the end but feels as if he has lost. I think it's a novel about morality and values rather than politics or religious belief as such.

**LV**. Your novels take the reader by surprise, prove his taste in romance old fashioned. Do you aim at surprise? Is it a major concern with you? What is your relationship with your reader?

**DL**. I think any good story should surprise the reader. If its development is totally predictable, there's not much point in reading it (unless it's a true story). How this can work when you re-read a fictional story is an interesting question – but it does; somehow you suppress your own knowledge to increase the pleasure of the text. One of the basic satisfactions of narrative is peripetia, a development that is both surprising and convincing, which accords with our experience that life is essentially unpredictable but governed by cause and effect. Frank Kermode has written very well about this in *The Sense of an Ending.* One aspect of the craft of fiction is to disguise the evidence that will retrospectively make your surprises convincing when they occur. Traditional romance as a genre tends to just pile on the surprises without bothering to make them convincing. The realistic novel tries to make them seem part of the representation of the real. One's 'contract' with one's reader depends partly on the genre of the work, the implicit rules by which it is governed. I called *Small World* an 'academic romance' to licence myself to incorporate a lot of improbable twists and coincidences in the plot.

**LV**. *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), not unlike *Souls and Bodies* (1990), focusses on a religious approach to life, which you contradict in *Paradise News* (1991). What does religion mean to you? How serious are you when you mock at its effects on everyday life? How moralizing?

**DL**. I think if you read my novels in sequence you will see a gradual waning of orthodox religious belief in the ‘implied author’. I don’t propose to comment here on the ‘real author’s’ religious position. *The British Museum is Falling Down* satirised Catholic doctrine, especially as regards sex, from within orthodoxy. *How Far Can You Go?* (called *Souls and Bodies* in the US) takes a more detached, more ironic view of the decline in orthodox belief and practice and questions its survival. *Paradise News* is written from an implied post-Christian perspective – which is not the same as non-Christian or anti-Christian. Simple belief in the transcendental is almost impossible, but the fundamental problems that religion addresses remain.

**LV**. In *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, and even more in *Out of the Shelter* (1970), the theme of America returning to her English origins, to Europe even, is obvious. The approach is totally opposite to Henry James. Americans are ridiculed. You have taught at Berkeley, yourself. Your trilogy, *Changing Places*, shows how familiar you are with American academics’ life. Do you view this theme of the American superiority with the same relaxed irony, with a sociologist’s concern, or with a touch of bitterness? What did your American experience mean to you?

**DL**. America and American culture are certainly key elements in my life and work. I don’t think Americans are ‘ridiculed’ by contrast with British or European people in my novels. All races are impartially mocked and satirised. I have always considered myself as generally sympathetic to America. To someone who was a child in World War 2, America was the powerful ally who helped us win, and its culture as mediated by films, magazines etc., epitomised the kind of materialistic good life for which Europe longed in the aftermath of war, and now enjoys. So I have used America as a way of exploring the theme of the pursuit of happiness ( a very American theme) by bringing my repressed Brits into contact with it. For what America has meant to me see my essay ‘The Bowling Alley and The Sun’ in *Write On.*

**LV**. In *Out of the Shelter* (1970), you are, it seems, more autobiographical, which is something you do not usually do. You also win the reader’s sympathy deliberately, which again you are unwilling to do openly in the other novels. Humour is your main character, most often than not. How much does your private life interfere with your imagination? Do you allow yourself to get lyrically involved when you write a novel?

**DL**. *Out of the Shelter* was a novel specifically sourced from my first actual encounter with American culture, and with Continental Europe, as a youth of 16. I think in retrospect it cleaves too closely to my own experience (not in the story, but in the detail of the setting) so remains a limited, but I think truthful piece of work. I think most novelists write more directly from their own experience in their earlier work, then, perhaps when they have ‘used it up’, deliberately research their novels.

**LV**. Do you have a favorite type of criticism? What critics do you hate (as a category)? What should the ideal critic do when faced with one of your texts? What is your favorite critical approach? The Desperado critic, in my view, is the critic who makes ample use of all critical approaches he knows, determined to understand the text but rejecting any device which would become an obstacle (see Deconstruction, which Bradbury so wonderfully deconstructed in *Mensonge*). Like the Desperado novelist, he returns to the pleasure of the narrative. Do you accept scholarly criticism? Should criticism be an enigma, to be decoded in its turn, in order to decode the work afterwards? Criticism is literature in itself, but should it make use of confusion as its peculiar suspense?

**DL**. There are different kinds of criticism which have different functions, from the journalistic to the scholarly. All have their place. Whatever type it is, I think criticism should be a pleasure to read by those who have an interest in it. I deplore the tendency of much (though not all) post-structuralist criticism to cultivate mystification deliberately. A good critical essay has a kind of plot – it has satisfying surprises in it. Reviewing has a special responsibility to be fair, because it affects the first reception of the work. Academic criticism is usually written when the book already has some kind of established currency, and so can follow its own agenda without doing much damage to the book or its readers. However I generally avoid reading academic criticism of my own work – its tendency to display mastery over the text can seem oppressive to the author. I like criticism which judges what the writer has done with his subject, rather than quarrelling with the subject, and which gives evidence to support its judgments. I dislike criticism which is motivated primarily by literary politics, or personal animus, or personal vanity.

**LV**. You are not very fond of the academic world, and use it to create humorous patterns which support your plots. The basic idea is that academics get themselves into situations which are hilarious, and even when you are not directly mocking at them, when the novel is more or less in earnest (see *Nice Work*), you cannot help creating ironical parallelisms. Bradbury has the same attitude, and, just like you, he was an academic. You taught for a while together in Birmingham. How do you feel about your status as an academic? Does it help novel-writing? Or criticism? Do you still teach? What?

**DL**. I was a university teacher from 1960 to 1987 (part-time in the last 3 years), then I took early retirement to write full-time. I enjoyed my work as an academic, especially the first two decades, and took it seriously, as both teacher and scholar. I published a novel and a critical book in alternation in these years. I never felt any creative or intellectual tension between these two activities: they complemented each other. But on the social-psychological level it was a kind of schizophrenic existence. I did not operate in the University as a novelist – I did not read my work on campus or discuss it with my students or teach creative writing (at Birmingham – I did elsewhere). I operated as a serious, committed academic. The novels, which often satirised or carnivalised the academic world, belonged to a separate

compartment of my life. It was a rather artificial distinction, and I was quite glad when I was able to take early retirement in 1987 to become a full-time writer. I am an Emeritus professor now. I don't teach any courses – for one thing I am getting hard of hearing – but I do very occasionally give a lecture or reading. Malcolm Bradbury and I were colleagues occupying adjacent offices for some years in the early 60s, and very close in every way. I valued our friendship, which continued after he moved to East Anglia, enormously and I was desolated by his untimely death last November.

**LV**. Your novels help the reader find himself and learn how to read. You are a critic and a novelist at the same time. How do you feel about clarity, the return to the story and characters? Do you feel like innovating, or merely entertaining your readers, in no sophisticated way?

**DL**. I think you can tell I am a teacher and critic in my novels, because I am careful to give the readers all the information and clues they need to follow and understand my meaning. Some critics think I try too hard to control the reader's response. It is not for me to say. I certainly see writing as essentially communication, as a rhetorical activity. And in the highest sense I think art must entertain, or give delight.

**LV**. *Changing Places* (1975) ends with a suggestion that a movie might do more than a written story. I do not think you really favour the film over the book, as what you say must always be taken with a grain of salt, but I will ask all the same: What do you think will be the future of the book? Can the screen (cinema, computer, television, 'telescreen,' etc.) supersede the pleasure of reading?

**DL**. A big question. Brief answer: no, I don't think visual and electronic media will make reading and the book obsolete. But the interaction between them will increase.

**LV**. Do you have a plan for your plot from the very beginning, and enrich it with details as you go along, or do you start with a mood and invent the story each day, as it comes? Is plot important?

**DL**. I have a provisional outline plot before I start writing, but it has a lot of blanks, like white space on old maps, which I fill up as I go along and that usually entails changing the outline I started with.

**LV**. What kind of writer would you say you are: comic, reflexive, deeply moral, tricky, innovative, involved, ironical? Does your writerly self bear any semblance to your everyday self? What is essential in the daily life of the author David Lodge?

**DL**. It is not for me to describe ‘David Lodge’ the implied author of my books – it is for readers and critics.

2001

## Mary Michaels, *I aim for absolute clarity*

Interview with **MARY MICHAELS** (born 17 August 1946), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** Your poetry is both warm and impersonal. Your life is your life and your poems are another world. Is poetry meant to be a diary today, or a record of emotions whose reality must not be revealed? How much of your life do you put in your poems?

**MARY MICHAELS:** In one sense a lot of my life goes into my poems – in a very concentrated form (poetry *is* a very concentrated form of writing). All my work starts in lived experience; waking experience, the experience of a dream, very occasionally (as in *Gymnopédie* and *The Traveller*) the experience of another work of art. More precisely, each poem starts with an event which carries some kind of emotional charge and significance. The event usually catches me unawares and in writing the poem I attempt to catch its significance by giving it form in words. At the same time, however, as soon as I begin to focus on it, the experience moves into the realm of the impersonal, almost the public, 'out there' beyond me, detached from myself.

If the collection of poems does in the end constitute a sort of record or diary it is a very haphazard one: I have no such project or plan (I don't even 'write every day' as many poets say they do). Each poem, to me, is a discrete entity. Paradoxically, in view of your sense of emotions being hidden, it is the emotional charge that I try to re-create but I feel I can only do so by re-creating the event.

**LV.** Could you reveal a few major coordinates of your life, such as education, profession, family? What have you studied, what do you do for a living? Do you have children? What do you think is the axis of your life?

**MM.** I come from a lower middle class London family: small business people on both sides. My mother worked as costing clerk: my father was a shop-worker who started up his own grocery when I was very small. I was only the second person in my extended family to go on to higher education after secondary school. I took a BA at Bristol University, on a modular degree course covering Philosophy, Theology and the History of Art. Subsequently, while working, I took a professional qualification in librarianship and after another long interval an M.A. in Existential Psychology. I have done a large number of different jobs; teaching, training, working as a publisher's representative, as an administrator in a charity and then in a small firm, librarian and information officer in charities and, most recently, a

long stint as a legal librarian. By contrast I have lived with the same partner in the same London house for many years. I have no children.

Rather than describing it as revolving round an axis I think I see my life as the traveling of a circuit around various fixed points; family, friends, paid work, writing and so on, each requiring attention, in differing amounts at different times. But writing is certainly very important.

**LV**. Why did you choose poetry? Have you also tried fiction or any other kind of writing?

**MM.** In lyric poetry you can say a great deal in very few words. I like the compression of the form. I have written some short monologues of which one has been published and one broadcast and some other prose pieces that fall between genres; they could be radio plays for several voices or texts for the page. These are fictional; I make up the voices. But in general, I don't think I have a story-spinning imagination and I certainly don't have the ability to tolerate uncertainty that the writing of a full length novel would require.

I have also written poetry reviews and occasional pieces on other women poets and visual artists. And, of course, a lot of academic essays (having been a student three times).

**LV**. In one of your poems you talk about Australia. Are you related to that country in any way? The poem *Conversation* mentions a dead brother. Was he real? Is your poetry close to fact or do you prefer to imagine situations for emotions that happened in a very private environment, which you would rather not reveal?

**MM.** Three sets of cousins on my mother's side emigrated to Australia shortly after marriage and had their families there. But the reference in *Conversation* is to the fact that the death of my only brother, at the age of 32, took place in that country. My one visit to Australia was following this. The poem sprang out of a series of dreams I had over the subsequent few months. *The Ice Land* came from another dream.

As I've already said, poems for me always start in lived experience; I never 'make things up'. In fact the suspicion that I might be beginning to 'make it up' as I write accounts for many a sheet of paper being consigned to the waste bin. My aim is to capture the experience as accurately as I can.

Once the poem begins to take form, however, it begins to make its own demands; in terms of rhythm, and of what I can only describe as its sculptural or architectural shape. So then the task is to find the words that will meet these demands without sacrificing accuracy.

**LV**. The poem *Candle* is a delicate and deep investigation of the near-sleep, the verge of sleep, as you call it. Your whole poetry has a tenderness that can be associated with the surrender to sleep. You write lines starving for the

protection of the peaceful night, when all you can do is feed on your sensibility. Is emotion the core of your writing, or do you see your poetry as centered upon imagination of incidents, of stories, of characters?

**MM.** It is the emotional charge of an event that furnishes the incident and characters of the poem and pushes it to completion and I can't separate out the one from the other.

I do think *Candle* however, could be taken as an analogy for the kind of half-focused attention that has to be paid to experience in order to write; something between inward looking and inward listening.

**LV**. A poem like *Late* resorts to the universe of very familiar gestures, such as putting up clothes to dry upon a line in the evening. Your words are all familiar and shy. Your voice is both delicate and penetrating. Do you see yourself as a bold sensibility? Are your poems bold?

**MM.** I think they are often bold in *manner* and sometimes in matter. I aim for absolute clarity and that can be startling.

*Late* presents a familiar action in what was, to me, an unfamiliar place; a rather remote village in southern Spain. It was the first time I had lived in a Mediterranean country and I was enraptured by the quality of the colours and the light.

**LV**. *The Square* is a poem about the need for power, the power to bring the pigeons down, to stop their flight, and, implicitly, to start it when the poet wants. Have you ever dreamed about flying? Would it be very wrong for me to say that your poems are all like short flights which end on the ground only because the bird/poet has to rest before the next trip?

**MM.** *The Square* is certainly about power; the revolutionary power of the person who deliberately contravenes the rules of the authoritarian city ('*no one is allowed to feed the pigeons here');* the power of the birds themselves (who can push themselves up and down against the force of gravity) and the power of the dream realm in which I can experience myself as a man, with no sense of incongruity. It was originally published as the final piece in a group of poems about pigeons, which – sometimes light-heartedly – encapsulated the contradictory feelings they arouse in city dwellers, some of whom want to feed them and others to have them shot.

I cannot ever remember flying in my dreams: my recurrent dreams are more prosaic – missing a bus or train, sitting an exam for which I've not prepared, standing up to read my poems to an audience and finding I haven't got them with me.

I am interested in your analogy 'the poems as short flights'; I have never thought of it that way before.

**LV**. *Continuity* is a half-sad, half-funny (in precisely that order) poem about the monotony and the precious peace, at the same time, of everyday gestures, such as tying an apron in the kitchen. Your poems deal with what is apparently a small universe of small gestures, but the halo of tenderness of your lines is all-pervading. When you write, does sensibility or does wit come first?

**MM.** The poem starts with an indefinable inkling of something.

**LV**. *Unrealized* is an indirect love poem. Oblique yet very intense. Shy, mostly. You do not rip love open in your lines, you prefer gazing at it from the distance of your soul high up, while your body crawls helplessly on the floor of life. In short, you are very much a meditative poet. Do you ever write for the sake of mere poignant emotion, before having had time to filter it into a thought?

**MM.** I think of *Unrealized* as an erotic poem, rather than a love poem. And perhaps the word is *sly* rather than shy! The title plays on the two possible meanings of *unrealized;* something that’s not apprehended and something that hasn’t actually come to pass.

Yes, I am sometimes tempted to write from immediate emotion but those pieces always feel false and I don’t finish them.

**LV**. *The Tin* is a sad admission of creeping age. Your mother comes first and your heart aches. Laughter, which is mentioned obsessively, hides tears. This is not the first time the poem hides its topic. You are secretive in what you write. Would it be poetry if you stated your emotions plainly? Is it more that an inherent strategy of poetry? Are you usually careful not to be found out in your poems?

**MM.** Strangely, I feel that I am at my most self-revealing in my writing. But I am said to be a very private person and I suppose it would be unlikely for that habit of being not to carry over into what I do.

**LV**. In *Music* you say:

my eyes
are closed

but I see everything.

This is a splendid description of the way you communicate with your readers. Too much decoding of your lines would smash their charm. What do you think of dry, deconstructing criticism, that treats the text as a pretext for witty analysis? What kind of criticism do you favour?

**MM.** I read hardly any literary criticism. When I have done so I have usually been surprised by it and found it quite distant from my experience as a writer and a reader. I have always preferred just to read books, think about them and then read them again. This led me to part company with literature as an academic study in my first year of University.

I do however believe it is possible for criticism to illuminate a writer's work so that the reader can come into a closer relationship with it. The book *Imagining Characters* by A.S. Byatt and Ingrid Sodre (which deals with a selection of twentieth century British and American novels) does that. However I know that the approach this book takes is not fashionable. I don't at all like the idea of *using* other people's writing to demonstrate one's own cleverness though I understand the temptation.

**LV**. *Sea Road* ends with the sentence 'I am ready to walk the sea.' Flying, walking waters. Your mind certainly hungers after forbidden realms. At the end of this interview, do you place yourself in any literary context? Could you mention a number of literary friends? Would you accept being called a Desperado poet?

**MM.** I meet regularly with two groups of friends for discussion of work in progress; Frances Presley and Brian Docherty; Sara Boyes, Barbara Zanditon and Katherine Gallagher, all of whom write in very different ways.

I think the voice of my poetry is British (as opposed to North American), female and twentieth (moving into twenty-first) century. That is the broad context. I have tended to see my aesthetic as modernist (which is not, of course, avant-garde).

In the sense of the dictionary definition of Desperado, 'one ready for any deed of lawlessness or violence', I cannot see myself this way. But I can relate to the way you use the word in the context of contemporary literature. I am aware that my work differs from the discursive mode of mainstream British poetry, and seems to move at a tangent to the habitual expectations of readers. For instance, I have always been concerned to create a body of work in which poems do not repeat each other; it has come as a surprise to find that the resultant variety is not always regarded as a virtue. Similarly I use some metrical devices but am not interested in metre as such; at the same time am not dogmatically bound to free verse – I don't feel I have to eliminate a rhyme if one should happen to pop up. And in some of my most recent pieces I find myself midway between poem and prose.

A reviewer recently wrote of *The Shape of the Rock*;

‘One has a sense of Michaels persistently starting over; no one poem predicts the next either in content or prosody; just as one is tempted to place her as the cool-eyed empiricist (consider the deliberately prosaic *Callé de Jesus* the stripped of all decoration *Lade Halt*...) one runs up against her myth-making in *The Traveller*, a piece... as clear-eyed as her unlyrical observations, but leaving the reader in little doubt that something lies outside the bare bones of the facts... Lineation and stanza groupings are equally unfixed from poem to poem... Perhaps this is a function of her relative unformedness as a poet or perhaps (as I suspect) it is a conscious choice... If so, that reflects a courageous aesthetic but a tough one to live up to.’ (Peter Armstrong, *Other Poetry, II/23, 2003)*

That seems to suggest a certain reckless lawlessness, doesn’t it?

November 2003

## Timothy Mo, *What one wants to do is leave the novel different from how one found it and yet to contribute to the canon as well*

Interview with **TIMOTHY MO** (born 1950), British novelist

**LIDIA VIANU**: You belong to two worlds at once. Your books revolve around heroes who are displaced and belong to several universes at the same time. Displacement is a major feature of contemporary literature. Exile is the condition of the third millennium, I should say. How do you cope with its alienation, excitement, weariness?

**TIMOTHY MO**: I'll deal with personal issues in the appropriate format and length if I survive to write my autobiography

**LV**. Another major feature of the Postmodernist – or, as I call Postmodernism, Desperado – hero is solitude. Your heroes are apparently solitaries. You build a strange sense of defamiliarizing community around them. Where is your familiar community, where do you feel at home and what society are you actually describing in your books?

**TM**. I feel at ease where I can speak the local language and am efficient on the public transport system, although 'system' would sometimes be a misnomer. In practical terms, this means the obvious Anglophone and Francophone nations and the southern Philippines and Thailand. Although I feel rather more comfortable anywhere in Thailand than I do in Mindanao, I am unable to read bus destinations in the Thai script. The 74 letter alphabet is likely to remain impermeable to me with my total lack of visual acuity. However, Vietnamese and Philippine dialects are all romanised, so one is unlikely to get on the wrong bus in the hinterland.

**LV**. *Sour Sweet* is an elegy of Chinese loneliness and adaptation to another planet, as it were. You use tenderness, not humour. You wrote that book in the vein of Peter Ackroyd, Graham Swift and Kazuo Ishiguro – though not quite – as opposed to Julian Barnes, Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge. You are both picturesque and scary in your descriptions of China and England as two separate universes colliding. Do you consider yourself an affectionate writer? Or rather cold, observant and detached?

**TM**. Both.

**LV**. Your narrative methods are varied. You enter the minds of your characters without a previous plan, you become an objective narrator when we least expect it, in short you do not conform either to realism or to Postmodernism. You are a nonconformist, which is what most contemporary writers aim at being but few succeed indeed. Is your dissimilarity deliberate or does it come naturally, because this is the only way you can write?

**TM**. I have always felt the distinction between the so-called experimental and the traditional novel or between post-modern and realist to be purely an invention of the academic mind. At the very best, it misses the most important distinction – between the original and the derivative. The phantastical South American, sub-continental, or indeed, Nigerian, novel can actually be rather more predictable or generic in its bombast than the simpler product of the English gentlewoman who finds herself wittingly or unwittingly the heir of Jane Austen. The important distinction to draw is between what is fresh in substance and treatment, and sentiment, too, and what is just the product of received opinion and copied technique. I think radical orthodoxies, political or artistic, are actually the most insidious. What one wants to do is leave the novel different from how one found it and yet to contribute to the canon as well, so that it would be difficult to imagine literature without that particular book. This is a squaring of the circle – the desire to be revolutionary and classic at the same time. I think it is mistaken to strive for this originality, however. The novel then becomes contrived and weak. If I had to pick a merit in my own contribution, I would say my books are strong – the strength coming from the uniqueness of the language, the characterisation, and the unusual but prophetic nature of the material. A book will also later be seen to have force if it was relevant, that is if it dealt with the pertinent issues of its day. Perhaps my material looked arcane and the characters obscure from the point of view of a New York yuppie fifteen years ago, or in 2004 for that matter, but I am absolutely confident that I am writing about the important things and that what appears marginal today will be central tomorrow. We live in an age of the mixing and violent reaction to each other of different cultures – you cannot hope to interest posterity in the unalloyed travails of Stoke Newington or Greenwich Village.

**LV**. How do you start a novel? With a feeling, a mood, a story, a thesis, a dream?

**TM**. Following on from the last, I start with the people. Creating life is the task of the true novelist. Sometimes I also start with a theorem – a posit for human nature which I have to prove – but this is part of the characterisation process really.

**LV**. How do you like to end your novels? *Sour Sweet* ends like an elegy. Nothing is closed, the sadness just grows inside the reader until you let it out by allowing one faint gleam of hope. Do you like to end a plot for good? Is the sense of closure something the novel needs (considering you run away from it so constantly)?

**TM**. I have very little interest in plot as a writer. As a reader I am as susceptible to its consolations as anyone else, with the proviso that any time the structure has run away with the characters and the ideas I find myself skipping huge tracts and never returning. On the other hand, I also do this with Indian and Latin American writers whose works are quite innocent of anything like a plot. As to a conclusion, I think it is possible to close very definitely or very inconclusively. Either way will do and either way is as old as the form itself. A definite sense of loose ends tied will satisfy the reader more but this is sometimes an abdication from the task of representing the complexity and immorality of the way things are in the world.

**LV**. Your basic mood is that of humour. You write with a sense of humour above all, and maybe this is what prevents you from using mere irony. You prefer sympathy. Ever since the Modernists, since Joyce and Eliot, irony has been the sacred tool of the writer. All myths have been debunked. It seems to me you are building the walls of the sacred again. Am I wrong? If I am not wrong, how do you bring the mystery of worship back to the written page (because I feel this is what you do)?

**TM**. I can't imagine writing anything without humour of some kind in it. It's the great puncturer of pretension and as a novelist I'm interested in how people actually are, not in how they present themselves. Having said that I do believe in the possibility of heroes and heroines: not born so but forced to become so by circumstance.

**LV**. I could not help noticing in your books the perfect use of landscape. Unlike most contemporary writers – even poets – who run away from old-fashioned realistic description, so totally discredited by Balzac and the rest, you make each landscape you describe into a small poem. Your novels are thus spiced with islands of lyricism. Do you acknowledge this use of landscape description as a deliberate tool, which connects yet disconnects you from the realistic tradition?

**TM**. It does apparently connect me to the realist tradition but not in actuality. I've never visited most of the landscapes I describe: I just invent them – e.g. East Timor. It came as no surprise when Graham Swift mentioned to me years ago that he had never visited the Fens, much to the dismay of a TV crew hoping to be taken to a choice location by him.

**LV**. Do you read criticism about your work? Do critics' opinions interest you? If they do, what kind of criticism do you prefer? Academic or (unfortunately old-fashioned but always so satisfying) reader-friendly texts? What should criticism do in order to be useful and justify its existence? In good old Eliot's words, what should the function of criticism be?

**TM**. I've no interest in reading literary criticism and what has been written about myself is mostly risible but it seems to me good criticism has to be as creative as fiction, while still being bound by fidelity to what it illuminates. Then again there is no point in writing a novel that is not faithful to human nature.

22 September 2004

## **John Mole,** ***My addiction is to surprise and the unexpected***

Interview with **JOHN MOLE** (born 12 October 1941), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: You are a poet, a teacher and a musician. The three are closely connected, I guess. Your lines are didactically clear (thank God for clarity) and also delightful webs of themes that remind anyone of jazz. What do you think of those poems which you hardly understand, which operate with bits of meaning and leave the whole open to conjecture? Is clarity a concern of yours or just an instinct?

**JOHN MOLE**: My addiction is to surprise and the unexpected. If there's no surprise for the writer then there's unlikely to be any surprise for the reader, as Robert Frost once said. I suppose there must be a connection between the three activities. As a teacher of Literature I've always tried to make it new for myself – not to do that would be to go stale very quickly. Just think – 'Macbeth' for the hundredth time, saying the same thing about it! I've always enjoyed following up and improvising on students' insights, finding this in itself to be a kind of creativity. Education as conversation, if you like. I try to be well-read but never over-prepared. To be over-prepared is to run the risk of not being alert to all those chance changes of direction which can make a good session in the classroom an event, a process of mutual discovery.

It's much the same, for me, with jazz. Conversation within a frame, continual alertness and a balancing act of control and risk. I like the account Earl Hines once gave of his jazz performances when playing a familiar number: 'Every time, I try to find a different way of laying down the chords towards a fixed point, and when you see me smiling you know I'm lost.' Except, of course, that you know it's the smile of experience, of being musically well-read enough to risk going out on a limb.

As for the poetry, those 'webs and themes' you're kind enough to detect in my work are the directions I take within – in the main – quite traditional forms. The clarity you refer to is probably a matter of form, a sense of security attendant on traditional patterns. Within these patterns, though, my instinct is to be oblique, subversive and above all open-ended. I feel the need for the tensions within a poem to be resolved but I don't want anything to be wrapped-up, snapped-shut. Robert Graves, a poet I admire and who taught me much by example, has a fine poem in which he writes of ending 'on a careless comma'. Graves is, of course, a highly disciplined poet. There's nothing careless about his craftsmanship. The carelessness he celebrates is a kind of insouciance, a lightness of being, conferred by the strength of his technique. I find this very congenial. Open to conjecture? Yes. No full stops. In short I suppose what connects the

poetry, the jazz and the teaching is that they are all part of an ongoing conversation – with myself and within the hearing of others.

**LV**. I have come across a poem which is emblematic for the way your sensibility blends with discreet, incomplete (yet perfectly clear) expression: *The Cherry Tree*. I will quote it in full, for the readers who have not met you yet:

Welcome to the cherry,
So unequivocal,
So full
Of itself, so utterly

Not you, not me, with our same
Questions,
The old stones'
Word game

Of this year
Last year
Next year
Never...

Of Do you love me
As much as...?
Or Who was
He or she?

Or Do you love me less
Than I love you?
Or Tell me something new.
Haven't I heard this?

Welcome to the cherry,
Its white silence,

Its common sense,
Its letting be.

You write for the soul. Language, though, plays along. Do you have to work hard for the poem, or is it easily written, without toil for the best, the chiselled word?

**JM**. The hardest thing about writing this particular poem, I remember, was removing a stanza which originally came after the one which ends it now. I sent it in its original form to a magazine editor whose judgement I respect, and he suggested the cut. At first this seemed too radical, and I resisted it, but the more I thought about it the more I could see that he was right. I had wanted to end with an image rather than a statement ( you have probably already gathered that I don't like being didactic ) but in this case the meaning is, I suspect, in the cadence as much as in the statement so I'm happy with that. In general I find the hardest work comes after the initial draft, and this is not so much a matter of 'chiselling' the words as it is of taking out lines and stanzas which draw too much attention to themselves at the expense of the poem as a whole.

**LV**. Love is a shared solitude in many poems. It is also a poignant emotion which the words conceal, will only allude at, never name plainly. Your poems are not only clear, but also shy. The two do not usually work together. You manage to help the reader understand while hiding the core of emotion from him. Like a good poet, actually, you are indirect. It is a feature of what I call the Desperado poets to veil their meaning in apparently meaningless commonplace. The meaning is no longer inside the word, it becomes the halo of the word. Your poems have this halo of meaningful emotion. Do you think this is what poetry has been doing ever since ancient history, or do you feel you are doing something new? Because it is my conviction that you do, you unveil the way to a new poetic idiom in your lines.

**JM**. I do like your phrase 'the halo of the word', and that is certainly an effect I should hope to achieve. You also put your finger on a problem I am very aware of when you speak of 'apparently meaningless commonplace'. I can imagine some readers of my work becoming impatient with a certain unemphatic quietness. In fact I was once told by an examiner who had wanted to set a group of my poems for study that his colleagues had rejected them on the grounds that there wouldn't be enough in them for students to write about. I suppose it may be true that they don't present the kind of difficulties which appeal to the analytic mind. On the other hand, I should like to think that they have a resonance which appeals to the imagination and which, with luck, may lodge there. A sort of slow-burning fuse. A deceptive simplicity, perhaps. It always pleases me when people tell me that they have particularly liked a poem of mine but can't explain why. If they simply want to quote it back at me I take this as the highest compliment, much more precious than even the most flattering analysis. A new poetic idiom, though? I rather doubt it. It's in the world of

academic criticism that fashions tend to come and go, hence the fluctuation in poetic reputations. All the poet can do, I think, is write according to his or her temperament, never to a programme dictated by current 'ologies' or 'isms'.

**LV**. You mention in one poem Yeats, 'Who said that poetry is our quarrel with ourselves.' I think your poems do quite the opposite: they find the point of harmony. Your most effective refuge is childhood. *Wind-Up* is a good example, mixing object-time and soul-time, if it can be put that way. Your emotions, though painful and sharp, are very much at peace with themselves. You do not write to exorcise, but to share this feeling of certainty. What do you feel in front of the white sheet of paper, before you begin a poem? Have you ever experienced Eliot's reiterated fear that you will never be able to write again? Because you seem inexhaustible to me, although you do not need an emotional circus for that.

**JM**. Louis MacNeice, a poet I much admire, answered the question 'Why do you write?' by explaining that it was probably because he became restless when he wasn't writing. As to whether I ever fear that I shall never write again, well yes. It happens if that 'restlessness' has not been there for some time. Or if everything I write falls dead on the page. On the other hand I find it important always to get something down – not to stare too long at a blank page or a blank screen. However dead the line seems, I take it for a walk – as Paul Klee put it when talking about drawing. I don't think I'm inexhaustible but I do regard the act of writing as regular work. My best friend is – as it was for Graves – the waste-paper basket. I keep at it and hope the lightning will strike. Incidentally, I don't regard childhood ( which I realise features largely in my work ) as a refuge. It is often in childhood that we experience emotion at its most primal and naked, childhood as a source of imagination rather than a refuge from adult concerns.

**LV**. Since you mentioned Yeats, I remember his despair at the idea of growing old and becoming 'a tattered coat upon a stick', because his heart was 'fastened to a dying animal'. Your *Going On* comes two poetic generations later (after Eliot and
post-Eliotians) and yet talks about the same thing:

Scotch and water, warm,
Medicinal, two tablets
On a little tray, his Times
Tucked underarm, a dignified
But frail ascent, prolonged
Undressing measured out
By heavy footsteps, coughing

Gently not to worry us, as if
A mere polite reminder, then
The silence of the grave.

And why must I recall this now
As half-way up the stairs
I hear my grown son calling
Going on, then, Dad?
An early night? Sleep well.

The sadness hurts. Yet the words are incredibly serene. While describing Alan Brownjohn's poetry, I often talked about blank words. Your words go beyond being blank. They blindfold the reader, comfort him ('There, there, it's all right, don't be afraid'), until the last line falls like an axe and you have taken it all in, you can no longer forget it. The reader is trapped into your poems. Are you aware of this aggressive meekness? Do you see yourself as gentle or violent? Because your poems are violent emotions in very gentle words...

**JM**. I find it very difficult to answer the questions here. I do, I suppose, tend to understate emotion, particularly painful experience, but whether I am personally gentle or violent depends, I suspect, on circumstance. My star sign is Libra – the scales! Perhaps you could characterise me as a Libran poet – which I hope doesn't make me sound dull. What I don't want to do is to bombard readers with emotion, with a kind of 'look at me, here are my entrails!' insistence. If you detect a 'meekness' I wouldn't say that it's aggressive. I should like to think that I am inviting readers to share my experience. Too much emotion insisted upon would crowd them out, leaving no space for their own response. That kind of space is very important to me. You could almost call it an intuitive strategy involving courtesy to, and respect for, the reader.

**LV**. *When did you start writing poetry?* seems to intimate that a poem means 'to search for a silence/ that nobody but myself could hear'. The Desperado poet is essentially reticent. Yet you are not simply that. You create the impression that a lazy sensibility unfurls a poem in which every line is a postponement of the truth. That also brings in a very effective sense of suspense. The reader learns to wait for the last line breathlessly. This is your own, peculiar poetic strategy. Your patience with the word creates very impatient readers, who want it all at once: both the obvious (tame) statement and the shy (wild) feeling, which you only obliquely hint at. How do you yourself define your poetic approach? Are you an emotional or intellectual poet, in your view?

**JM**. I think the question here has already been answered, if indirectly. I'm really not sure, though, how I would define my 'poetic approach'. E.M. Forster once asked 'How can I know what I think until I see what I say?' And, in my case, every poem is an attempt to know by saying. Emotion and intellect are, I'd suggest, inseparable in this venture. Let me quote from another of Graves's poems: 'You were venturesome, I was shy'. Well, there I am – quarrelling with myself – because I'm probably both at once when I'm writing.

**LV**. In *The Erl-King's Daughter* I cannot help noticing your playful use of incredibly subtle half-rhymes, which give to most of your poems an air of bewildered, stealthy musicality. I can hardly point my finger at it, but it affects the music and rhythm of my thoughts as I read. Does rhyme engage your attention in any way? What does the music of a poem consist in for you?

**JM**. I'm so glad you comment on the rhyming in this poem but I particularly like poems where the rhyme is sensed rather than immediately noticed. Browning's monologue 'My Last Duchess' is a fine example of this ( and, of course, 'The
Erl-King's Daughter' is also a monologue ). Half-rhyme, para-rhyme, slant-rhyme, call it what you will, give a poem momentum, helping to call up the next line and to advance the narrative. I understand you perfectly when you speak of 'stealthy' musicality. Though I'm not sure about 'bewildered'. What, increasingly, I've come to avoid ( or try to ) is rhyme which gives a poem the air of spurious neatness. This relates to what I said earlier about not wanting to wrap things up in a poem. To do this would be to impose too much of a limiting frame on what you describe as 'the rhythm of thought'. Rhyme, for me, must be discreet if it is to realise its full potential. In the kind of poem I want to write, that is. For the satirical poet, for example, it's another matter altogether – as, say, for Byron in 'Don Juan' where rhyme comes front stage and has us admiring its ingenuity.

**LV**. However tender your poems, however quiveringly sensitive, they are also stubbornly ironical, though, again, in a devious way. *Grandmother's Advice* debunks Red Riding Hood's tale, maybe even mixes it with Snow White (the bite from the apple?), and ends in existential sadness. It is a thoughtful and emotional burden. It hides deep inside the 'core' of fear. It seems to me all your poems are afraid. Afraid of being afraid, afraid of your own intensity. You do not use dramatic scenery and linguistic fireworks, like most Desperadoes, because with you it is all inside. You do not need to show it, it is all too true. All you have to do is peep and smile, and the poem is ready. What do you choose, the smile or the peep/ frowning thought? Which would you say the key note, the defining mood of your poetry was?

**JM**. It's interesting that you should pick on 'Grandmother's Advice'. I've always been fascinated by the darker tales of the Brothers Grimm, and the forest as a location for domestic drama. I also much admire the fiction of writers such as

Angela Carter which recasts folk tale in a contemporary idiom. Carter's collection 'The Bloody Chamber' (which, incidentally, contains a version of 'The Erl-King' ) is one that I go back to quite often. Its mixture of passion and irony – often with an added touch of surrealism – is my kind of brew. I'm sure you're right to detect a 'core' of fear in much of what I write, of (metaphorically ) children lost in a wood. I'd not though of it until you raised the issue, but maybe a number of my poems are like the gingerbread house in 'Hansel and Gretel' – enticing sweetmeats on the outside walls but the witch's oven waiting inside. I should like to think, though, that they move towards striking an affirmative note and are not, ultimately, as fearful as you seem to suggest. My poem 'The Waterfall' ( from 'For the Moment' ) is perhaps the nearest I have come so far to defining the mood of my poetry and offering some kind of statement of belief.

**LV**. Age and death always benumb your poems, when they occur in your lines. *Last Look* is one good example:

He weighed so little. They carried him out
for a last look at the garden.
It blazed with autumn sunlight.
Gently they put down their burden.

Grief, not flesh, was the heaviness.
He asked to be left there.
'Troops, dismiss!'
A flash of the old order.

Nothing to do but obey.
The family mock salute.
At ease. Stand easy.
Go inside and wait.

So little. They watched from the house
for as long as it took
(which was hardest, they told us)
then carried him back.

The words are harmless, infinitely innocent. The meaning is the scythe of death. Your poem, an unbearable reconciliation of clarity and the unutterable. You stage the pain. You definitely rehearse your words. Could you reveal a few of the secrets that make your poems? What does it take for you to write a good poem?

**JM**. The answer to this question has to be ( Auden again ) 'If I could tell you I would let you know'. Don't think me evasive when I say that I have no secrets to reveal. Apart, that is, from saying that in a poem like 'Last Look' I take out everything that is not essential, but that is hardly a secret! I suppose I hope readers will supply all the additional detail from their own experience. If the poem is any good it will become a collaboration between writer and reader. My instinct, as a poet, is never to have what Keats called a 'palpable design' upon the reader.

**LV**. For the readers of this interview, could you mention the meaningful experiences in your life? And also the story that supports your imagination? What have you studied, what jobs have you had, which do you prefer? Did you choose poetry or were you chosen by it?

**JM**. A short biography, then, of the externals. I was born in the West Country of England in 1941 and had a fairly conventional middle-class upbringing as the son
(and grandson) of an accountant. My mother, as was often the case during and immediately following World War 2, was a full-time housewife. I attended various schools and went on to study English Literature at Cambridge University. Following that I became a teacher, mainly in England though with a spell in New York during the late 1960s – a difficult and, for me, certainly educative time, politically. I married in 1968 – my wife is the artist and illustrator Mary Norman, and we have worked together on several books for children. Our own children, two sons (Simon and Ben) were born in 1972 and 1974. Most of my adult life has been involved with teaching, although I took early retirement in 1998 and have since then worked freelance as a writer (book reviews, essays, poems etc.), lecturer, and jazz musician with my own quartet. I am also, currently, Visiting Poet at the University of Hertfordshire, and involved with an education venture, working, as a poet, with children in the inner city area of London where many of the children have English as their second language. Language, its patterns, rhythms, colours, have always been important to me from the earliest days I can remember, but though I always enjoyed poetry my ambition when at school was to be a novelist (see my poem 'The Cigarette' in 'For the Moment') and a chance meeting with John Steinbeck, one of my early idols, reinforced this. Then when I was nineteen I came across the poems of Robert Graves and was gripped by their clarity, economy and mixture of the classical and the romantic. My earliest poetic attempts were in direct imitation. Graves was a colourful character, very much the poet, and for a time I shamelessly modelled myself on him even adopting some of his more eccentric ( as I now see them to be ) world views. Did I choose poetry or was I chosen by it? A bit of both, I suspect. Who was it once said that he dabbled in verses and then it became his life? The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh, I

think. That has very much been the case with me, although I have also gained considerable satisfaction from my work as a teacher. One golden rule, though – I have never taught my own poems. For reasons of (false) modesty? Perhaps, though probably for the more selfish reason that I want to avoid becoming too conscious of where they come from and how they get written. This may explain a certain evasiveness in some of the answers I have been giving you!

**LV**. Since you have taught yourself for a while, I wonder what you think of academic criticism. What kind of criticism do you prefer (if any)? Eliot had a positive hatred of ‘-isms’, maybe that is why I have come up with the term Desperado. Maybe it was just to voice the contemporary lawlessness insofar as poetic art is concerned. Poets today mean to be different from other poets, other ages, even from their own previous work. They take the law in their own hands and turn their art into a frontier which is always farther away than the previous ones. Many of these poets objected to my calling them Desperadoes, taking that to mean a character from a Western. I wonder what you think about the term. Would you prefer a more scholastic definition for a possible contemporary stock of common features?

**JM**. Well yes, Desperado does sound a bit wild. It makes me think, immediately, of the black-hatted villain in a Western movie, but you will be defining your use of the term when you introduce your thesis, and it is certainly thought-provoking. I am, I guess, in two minds about academic criticism. It can be most illuminating and encourage readers to look at familiar poets from new and refreshing angles, although at its worst it makes excessive claims for mediocre poets who just happen to offer the kind of ‘difficulties’ that the academic likes to unravel. The criticism that appeals most to me, and which I return to, is nearly always by poets themselves – some of whom may well hold university posts but are independent of academic fashion. Among the poet-critics I most often read are Randall Jarrell, W.H. Auden, Geoffrey Grigson and Ian Hamilton. I admire Eliot but find too often that there is something a little too ex-cathedra about his judgement.

**LV**. Does your music bear any influence on your poetry? Do the two express the same inner need for safety and tenderness? Or is poetry tender and music safe? You are such an unreliable guide of the reader’s sensibility, you make him forget his fears and then release a whirlwind of emotional arrows. Your lines may seem gentle, but their intention is wild, and it is not just a smile. Yeats is not so far from you. You are both tragic at heart. Or aren’t you?

**JM**. Yeats said many memorable things – including the reference to poetry being the quarrel with oneself – and I admire him enormously. It would not, though, have occurred to me to see myself as being in any way close to him in spirit or temperament. There’s an aristocratic magnificence about his work, a hammered splendour which I cannot aspire to. A musicality, too, although by all accounts he was himself tone-deaf! As to whether my love of music has influenced my poetry, that’s hard to say. I’ve already mentioned the connection between jazz and poetry where

improvisation is concerned, but I'm not conscious of any further cross-over. I'm certainly fascinated by the relationship between composer and lyricist whether in the field of classical music – e.g. Britten and Auden – or popular song. The hand-in-glove collaboration between George and Ira Gershwin has always struck me as close to miraculous. I am currently working on a commission to write the lyrics for a composition to be sung by children as part of this year's Royal Jubilee celebrations. Not being a fervent royalist, I'm facing a double challenge. As Yeats would have said – 'the fascination of what's difficult'! Tragic at heart? I really couldn't say. But aren't we all, when it comes down to it, skating on ice that grows thinner as the years pass?

**LV**. Do you see yourself as part of any poetic group/ generation/ movement? Who are your friends and your foes in poetry? Do you have a pattern that shaped you, or a starting influence? Do you think the idea of movement still exists today? I think Desperadoes are all alike in their need to be different. Do you feel the temptation of singularity or would you prefer being integrated in a category?

**JM**. The only category I should want to belong to would be the category of kindred spirits. Movements are, I know, a convenient labelling, and it is sometimes to a poet's advantage that he or she be associated with one. You do perhaps receive more attention that way, at least from those critics who have discerned the movement and feel a proprietary interest in it. There are also poets whose instinct is to 'belong' and who find it stimulating to be part of a group. I have never found this to be either desirable or necessary. Nor am I someone who seeks to feel embattled and to thrive on literary enmities. Some might say that this makes me sound very dull. On the other hand perhaps (in your terms) it makes me something of a Desperado.

**LV**. To put an end to my questions, what is the reason for a poem (any poem)? Why does John Mole write, in this age of screens and computers, when fewer and fewer people read poetry?

**JM**. Everything I should want to say in answer to this question is best said for me by Auden in his poem 'The Cave of Making', addressed to the shade of Louis MacNeice:

> After all, it's rather a privilege
>   amid the affluent traffic
> to serve this unpopular art which cannot be turned into
>   background noise for study
> or hung as a status trophy by rising executives,

cannot be ‘done’ like Venice
or abridged like Tolstoy, but stubbornly still insists upon
being read or ignored: our handful
of clients at least can rune. . .

What more can I say, except that the reason for a poem is always the search for the elusive perfect match of form and content: in the words of Samuel Beckett: ‘No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’ So it goes on.

March 14, 2002

**Sean O'Brien,** ***Criticism needs to be readable***

Interview with **SEAN O'BRIEN** (born 19 December 1952), British poet and critic

**LIDIA VIANU:** I cannot help beginning with your *Deregulated Muse*, which is the best label for this 'particularly interesting poetic moment', and for fiction no less. You talk about 'deregulation', and it seems to me the concept applies to every field. I called these writers desperately fighting to differ from others (before and after) and from themselves, Desperadoes. Do you feel you belong to a large, stream-like trend of poets, all eager to un-belong? What main features would you ascribe to it?

**SEAN O'BRIEN:** The title *The Deregulated Muse* is ironic. In a British context 'deregulation' means the selling-off of public utilities (gas, electricity, water) – and services (the railways, parts of education, refuse collection,) into private hands, ultimately for private profit. This was the gospel according to Margaret Thatcher. As a Socialist I am opposed to this practice, which has resulted in some disasters (the railways in particular) and scandals (profiteering by executives). In poetry, though, 'deregulation' might be a liberation from the modernism/tradition dualism, or the breaking of Oxbridge/ middle class dominance in literature, or the greater role of women poets, or of poets from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, etc. So the title indicates a paradox.

**LV**. Your second point in the preface to *The Deregulated Muse*, which is of utmost importance to me and most readers of criticism, I should say, is that 'criticism had better be readable.' You argue: 'People may be interested in books, but most of them are most interested in people'. I come very close to my question here. Although you call poetry 'an art made of language', what do you make of this new production of poetry that deals with words more than it does with biographies? Women are emotional and autobiographical, but in the last few decades men have stuck to words as if they were a tight rope that must absolutely be walked. Don't you think this bravery might make them break their necks in the long run? Your own poems have so much reality, after all...

**SO**. You conflate two quite separate points. Criticism needs to be readable in the sense of being as well written as the literature it deals with. The point about people being more interested in people really expresses an anxiety about the present cultural dominance of personality over art, with the attendant problems of laziness and trivialization.

**LV**. Eliot was fond of using rhyme as a weapon of irony ('the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo...'). You, and many others, use it as fireworks. The more unusual and unexpected (prepositions, half-words, foreign pronunciation, everything is thrown in), the more fun. Have you ever been afraid that this game of words might scare away the common reader (the term pays homage to Virginia Woolf, the writer who never conformed to her theory in her own practice)? That a difficult poem, with complicated architectures of words, might end up hiding the soul behind the page? Or is that unimportant right now?

**SO.** You seem to assume that 'the common reader' has no obligation to equip him/herself to understand what s/he reads. Literature is not the same as effort-free consumerism. The 'common reader' has to bring his/her own seriousness to the activity of reading. If this is too much effort, then s/he has many other choices of activity. In Britain there is a long and honourable working-class tradition of self-education through organizations like the Mechanics' institute. Sadly, this has proved vulnerable to the distractions of the tabloid press, television and consumer capitalism.

**LV**. Your poems are vigorous yet full of ghosts. Sadness haunts you, and you look back while in the middle of a demonstration for more present. You put nothing aside of what is human and contemporary, from politics to inner life. How do you see yourself? A public bard or a poet of intimacy, or maybe both – and in that case how do the two mix?

**SO.** I don't accept that there is a separation of roles. The whole person contributes to the work.

**LV**. One line is haunting: 'The world is guilty of itself.' This is meant as a very concrete statement, and all your poems are burdened with a sense of wrong. This unexplained guilt is part of your strength. Is it in your nature, in your intellectual awareness, your emotional being? Guilty because of what?

**SO**. 'The world is guilty of itself' is not intended as a direct authorial statement of belief or feeling. The phrase is trying to identify what seems to be a basic belief of the police. Any resemblance to Catholic guilt is an interesting overtone. This poem is normally understood as comic, by the way.

**LV**. Reading most of what you have written, I have come across 'Vlad the Impaler' and also 'Dracula'. He was a Romanian, so I just wonder what you know about him and about Romania. This may be a dead end, but I was just curious.

**SO**. I have read Dracula, and his original, Vlad, exercises something of the same fascination for people in Britain – Romania being seen as the abode of the un-dead and the supernatural, a folkloric enclave on the edge of modernity. This view may well be wrong, but it's widespread.

**LV**. With Larkin or Hughes it is not very difficult to trace influences, but with your generation it becomes impossible. A faint Eliotian echo, a word or a rhyme, and the mention of some name here and there. You are one of the poets who go west (so Desperado may not be such a bad idea, if we think in these terms), who colonize a new poetic language and a new poetic vein. If you agree that novelty is essential to your art, how do you obtain it and what does it consist in?

**SO.** Here I'm not sure that 'novelty' is the right word, since it has overtones of ephemerality, to which poetry is – surely – always opposed.

**LV**. You create a new meaning for lyricism. You are both nostalgic ('The afternoon is permanent', 'The amateur god of this garden is me') and aggressive. Lyricism has most certainly changed its substance. We no longer expect what Byron's or Tennyson's readers expected (emotion well spread on the bread of the page). What would you advise your readers to expect from you? What are you willing to offer them?

**SO.** I'm not sure I understand this question. Lyric is not a separate category – it coexists with the dramatic, with satire and so on. The fact that emotion is not advertised doesn't mean it isn't there. I think readers must make their own minds up about the poems. I'm interested in history, politics, place and the workings of the imagination. The poems might appeal to readers who share some of those interests.

**LV**. A poem is entitled *Hatred of Libraries*. You do not approve of scholarship in everyday criticism, for everyone's use. You say there is a tendency to 'marginalise' art. I take it from your lines, as from your criticism, that understanding comes first and you can tolerate in others, but will never yourself be a fan of specialized distortions of sense. Scholarly critics can be very bellicose and intolerant. Unless one shares their particular jargon, one is worthless. Is criticism literature (not science), for you? Which implies that it ought to share the clear language of a novel? How about the poem... then?

**SO**. Firstly, 'Hatred of Libraries' is a comic poem. Secondly, what makes you think I disapprove of scholarship? Far rather scholarship than the self-regarding machine-code found in second-rate literary theory. The tasks of criticism are to illuminate and evaluate. Criticism must be as well written as the literature it studies – but this is not to exclude difficulty, any more than poems and novels exclude difficulty.

**LV**. I notice echoes from Tennyson (*Ulysses)*, Eliot (*Prufrock*, *The Hollow Men*, and more), Arnold (*Dover Beach*). The line, as I have already mentioned, is far from long, you are not a demonstrative erudite. Your poetry is anything but exhibitionistic intellectually. Indirectness is important to you, effects matter more than intentions. What exactly is your intention as a poet, and then as a critic? What effects do you hold dear?

**SO.** Allusions arise naturally in the course of writing. Poems stand open to other poems. I wouldn't sue an allusion simply to point at the cleverness of its presence. That would be pointless.

**LV**. You like to play. Playful rhymes, playful changes of literary titles, quotes, all well known and easily recognized. Yet very subtle, and restricting your audience to those who read a lot. What kind of a poet do you wish to be?

**SO.** If any poet were to restrict him/herself to the range of guaranteed general public knowledge, poetry would be as dull as most present day cultural activity.

**LV**. Your latest volume emphasizes more than before your ironic view of the fantastic. Your poetic universe relies heavily on fantasy, while alluding, peeping at reality. You love to laugh, and you laugh at everyone who comes to your gates with intellectual prejudices. In the last pages of your latest volume you write, 'We apologize for any delay and for the inconvenience history may have caused to your journey. On leaving the train please ensure you are completely possessed.' Your book ends with, 'TO BE CONTINUED' (no full stop). My impression is that your take poetry as an adventure. Both intellectual and emotional, even though you are quite reticent to give readers a naked soul to feast on. Has poetry changed as much as the novel today (which, to my mind, escapes twenty centuries of story-telling)? Do you subscribe to the tradition of lyricism?

**SO.** I hope to write poetry that uses the full keyboard, claiming its full range of method and subject.

June 2002

## Bernard O' Donoghue, *I am rather against 'confessional poetry'*

Interview with **BERNARD O'DONOGHUE** (born 1945), British academic and poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: One of the features of what I call Desperado poetry is displacement. You were born in Cork, and now teach medieval literature at Oxford. Your poems teem with characters from your childhood space and time. Your poems come not only from another time, but also from another place. You do not complain about the new place that has become your own, but cannot help dreaming. Poetry is a release of dreams, for you. An almost subconscious return to the roots of your imagination. How do you combine this rememoration with the fragile courage of instilling your present emotions into your poems? Do you consider yourself a poet of the present or maybe of the past?

**BERNARD O'DONOGHUE**: Displacement. This is very interesting and astute, I think. As one of your later questions suggests, I think I see myself as a writer of the present. Everyone always is; a well-known and cherished past place ('rooted in one dear perpetual place', Yeats says) is only one metaphorical language for talking about the present. Everything we say is received in its present context, isn't it? Another formula for it is Tom Paulin's 'theoretical locations'. Again, I think poems about sensitive or private subjects are just as revealing and embarrassing when set in the past or the present. I don't feel displaced at all in fact. I think we just are where we are at any given time, and interest in the past is interest in how we got there! I am of course deeply attached to Ireland. It is the place I know best. I think we always understand best the rules of the places we grew up in, like a native language. But of course it may be that those rules have changed there in a way that makes that place more different from what it was than other places are. I am not saying that is the case with my native countryside in North Cork particularly.

As for teaching medieval literature in Oxford, I think that we are at the same kind of distance from the Middle Ages as we are from distant countries. Edward Said's 'orientalism' applies very well to the Middle Ages, I always think; they are exotic and unclear and we can foist on to them any characteristics we choose. I don't know whether these things make me a Desperado or not. (That word in English, though not in Spanish maybe – is it Spanish? – has an air of mild reckless violence to it!)

**LV**. The titles of your three volumes of poetry – *The Weakness (1991), Gunpowder (1995), Here Nor There (1999)* – announce a kind of science fiction exit from reality. You start with the weakness of the mind and transitoriness of the body, go on with the blow up of familiar surroundings, and reach the point where your place is neither *Here Nor There*. Actually, in your poetry, you fight your own sensibility, summoning it to yield to language, which finally does happen,

in the reader's soul. Your poetic gift very accurately aims at the reader's response and surreptitiously imprints your own seal on it. Desperadoes reject reality, complain then of displacement, and end in dystopia. Your dystopic realm is the loss of your Irish world. In other words, you are only dystopic insofar as you haunt the reader with the pain of loss, the loss of reality. What is your mood when you write? Do you trust poetry to work as a catharsis for your sadness at a lost world, or, on the contrary, do you use poetry to state your optimistic belief in the recreation of the past?

**BO**. Dystopia. I am not sure how much this paragraph bears on me, but I think it is very brilliant! I think *The Weakness* IS about what you say (fragility of life, etc.), but I think *Gunpowder* – in so far as it has a single meaning – is saying that the unfamiliar things that we reject sweepingly may not be so threatening: just unfamiliar. I remember being very pleased when I came up with the title *Here Nor There* (from the last line of 'Westering Home') because I thought if 'neither here not there' means 'insignificant' (as it does idiomatically), then removing the negative 'neither' from the front should mean it now means 'significant'. It's a kind of pleasing sophistry; but the rather clichéd idea was that being between states or moods or places or times is our normal condition. Again, I don't feel especially displaced myself, except – as you say – by loss, precisely. The idea of a science fiction escape from reality is very intriguing. It's probably true. It's probably a gradual withdrawal from the functioning body and personality! Scary...

**LV**. While reading your poems, I tried to peep at your private life and it did not work in the least. This is another Desperado feature: stay away from confession, hide from the public eye, give the reader only those thoughts that do not give yourself away. When did you start writing poetry, what was the spur into verse (to quote Yeats)? You were born in 1945, and your first volume of verse appeared in 1991. Did you write poetry before that? Is poetry an annex of your teaching, an escape into creation after literary criticism? What books have you written on medieval literature?

**BO.** You are quite right about this. I am rather against 'confessional poetry' as it is called, which seems to me to lack modesty by focusing on the events of one's own life as if that is what is significant. My first (small) volume of poetry was in 1984, a pamphlet published in Oxford by my friend John Fuller on his Sycamore Press. But I was 38 then. In fact I only started writing poems in any concerted sort of way after the death of my mother in 1979 (which followed very shortly after the birth of my first child). I think those changes of state were consciously very influential on me. My mother died of cancer, very painfully for her and my two sisters and me. But I think also I felt released into a kind of honesty and openness by the death of parents. Maybe I felt it constituted an event of significance that it IS admissible to be confessional about – to talk about it without claiming undue self-importance.

I think of myself as a teacher before all else. I love the relationship that develops with clever young people, aged 18 to 22. I do think it's an enormous privilege, especially as you get older, to deal with people in that bracket. I particularly like teaching medieval literature because, I suppose, of its 'otherness' or whatever term might be used. Despite what

the scholars like to claim, we DON'T know how to interpret literature of other areas and cultures, and that is very stimulating. I suppose my favorite literature is the European love-poetry of the Blutezeit, c.1200: the troubadours and minnesanger particularly (Guiraut de Bornelh, Raimbaut d'Aurenga, Heinrich von Morungen). They are all so formally brilliant and so heartwrung at the same time. I think the book of mine I am most pleased with is my anthology *The Courtly Love Tradition* which came out in 1982. What I like best about medieval literature is the absolute centrality of 'love', amore, amor – whatever it means. Apart from that I have only written reviews and a few short articles on medieval things, which I regret. I am trying to compile an anthology of Middle English Secular Lyrics, to try to match them up with the Europeans. I'd like to write on Chaucer who I don't think is understood properly.

**LV**. I find echoes of Yeats and Eliot in your poetry. In *Granary* you write: 'shoring such fragments/ Against his ruins.' It is strongly reminiscent of the Eliotian emotional hell, only, having learnt Eliot's lesson of quoting mockingly, you could not really be farther from hell in your poems. What is your relationship with Yeats' modernist poetry, with Eliot's stream of consciousness poems? You come after Modernism, so you can afford taking it for granted. Do you also deny it? Or do you coexist with it peacefully?

**BO**. Yeats is the modern poet – predictably – that I spend most time with and know most of by heart. I admire the modernists, especially their note of rather self-indulgent desperation (I see: that's Desperado, isn't it?) But you are right: I do see it through an ironic veil, though I do admire their capacity to take things seriously. And you're right again: there is very little hell in my poems. They are mostly small-scale moral stories.

**LV**. Each of your evocative poems is a small story. It is a stream of consciousness device to mix literary genres (hybridization). You mix poetry, fiction and drama, and I should add to all that literary history and literary criticism, which seem to be always at the back of your mind. You do not narrate openly, but the poem curls around a fictional kernel, and often ends like a fable. Do you also write fiction? Is the narrative important to your meaning? Could you write poems that are mere lyrical rhetoric?

**BO**. That's a very good question. Ideally I would like to write short stories but I can't write prose somehow. I come from a part of Ireland (Cork) which has been a great centre of the short story: Frank O'Connor, O Faolain, Corkery, William Trevor. Some of my poems started out as prose short stories and then turned into poems (if that is what they are). And yes, you are right, I am consciously aware of hybridization. In fact I think I am dimly aware that these poems are working against a short story as a form more natural to them. Maybe that goes with a heteroglossic tendency that plays with accent and so on. I think I have written the odd piece of lyrical rhetoric ('The Sugawn Road' for instance), but even there the atmospherics are always very rooted in place. I have written (mostly in my early days: i.e. my early

30s!) some horribly overwritten rhetoric; for example the poem called ‘Holy Island’ (which has a wonderful medieval epigraph from the scholar Beryl Smalley). Pity the poem doesn’t live up to the epigraph!

**LV**. Your poems rely heavily upon atmosphere. *The State of the Nation* is a remarkable rendering of a deserted gipsy camp. You make it sound like a dream, caused by the evening’s reading. The dream comes up in many other poems. Your three volumes all have a halo of dreaminess. A Desperado poet is quite pragmatic, from what I have seen so far. In this respect, you are the total opposite, you are a mist that vanishes when scrutinized, and thrives on unquestioning communion. Is writing a laborious process for you? Do you work hard to fit every word in place, or do you listen to the call of imagination only? Is versification important to you? I have noticed a definite rhythm, but not much interest in tricky rhymes. Your simplicity of line is far more efficient than the fireworks of more technical poets. Do you have a theory of your own on what poetry should be?

**BO**. This may link to the previous question. I think I have got some sense of what poetry should do nowadays. I am very keen on the observation by the great critic F.R. Leavis, that we must give evidence that we have lived in our own time. I think poetry must sound natural to its own age and place. So I think the poetic line (which must have, in some sense, its own rhythm: otherwise it’s not poetry) must have a scansion and shape which loosely but traceably underlies the utterance that appears on the poem’s surface, while at the same time being of its time. This sounds vague, but I find it dictates quite strictly what I do and don’t write – which I find surprising.

I don’t find writing laborious. My experience of it is that, if it doesn’t take shape fairly quickly and naturally, it isn’t going to do it at all. For the most part I think I go on liking poems in inverse relationship to the amount of time I have spent writing them. Or maybe I mean *believing* rather than liking them: so I think ‘The Iron Age Boat’ and ‘O’Regan the A.A.’ remain successful but, say, ‘The Potter’s Field’ (which I am fond of) finally doesn’t. (That too has some overblown rhetoric!)

**LV**. In *The Must-Beloved* (which meaningfully replaces most with must in a post-Joycean impulse, possibly), you talk about ‘the blast from the past’, which seems to me to be a wonderful definition of what you yourself are doing. *The Absent Signifier* describes the subconscious reasons for taking a photo, the need to prove you ‘have been there.’ All your poems are proofs of existence. They are memories, but relate to the present. I have this – possibly very wrong – certainty that this past you keep conjuring up is your way of expressing the present. You are much more than a dreamy poet, you are a dynamic observer of your contemporary world, which you fit in the wooden sabots of medieval literature. Do you write with your sensibility (this would be my guess) or with your knowledge about the Middle Ages, your sadness about the irretrievable past?

**BO**. Again, you have anticipated me! The proofs of existence are the Leavisite evidence for living in our time I suppose. I used to have a conscious fear of having lived to no purpose. But I don't feel that any more: three children, books and so on. I suppose I think my achievements, limited as they are, are more than my talents warrant!

I am delighted you think my pasts are ways of representing the present. That is exactly how I see it. After all, the past is meaningless except from the perspective of the present, isn't it? There's that very clever and true opening of Hartley's *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.' He is right to put them in the third person, isn't he? They are not us. I met last week someone I used to work with 32 years ago whom I hadn't seen since. He was, without question, a different person. Very often the pasts in the poems are moralities which bear on the present. As I said before I think, the medieval world is foreign in the same way. But Chaucer, for example, is full of moments that bear directly on our times. 'The Must-Beloved' is a very medieval idea – courtly love, *amor de lonh*, and so on. I think the title is a variation on Hardy's *The Well-Beloved;* but of course he is alluding to that medieval tradition. I suppose it is about the foolishness and ultimately self-indulgence of falling in love: 'in love with being in love' and all that. 'The Nuthatch' (which I still like: better indulgent rhetoric there!) is about the same thing.

**LV**. *The Fool in the Graveyard* is one among your many poems on death. Death is part of history for you, and therefore a bit unreal, just part of the past. Almost reassuringly, your poems describe the death of one hero or another, seeming to hint at the reader's being safe from death, since he has survived death. This is a very Desperado treatment of tragedy. You ignore it. You also use irony to belittle it. Are you a tragic sensibility or a strong intellect? Or – my guess again – both? Do you set great store by irony?

**BO**. I think, quite honestly, that I have a weak intellect. I was very good at elementary mathematics but I have little conceptual power and a terrible memory (except for anecdotes and useless moments from the past – useful for small poems of course!). I don't think my sensibility is tragic either; it is a bit melancholy. Doleful maybe, to use an archaic word! I feel comfortable discussing death. The Irish countryside (maybe all countrysides) are very good at that particular *rite de passage*. The English are terrible at it: they are terrified of it and retreat into pious sentimentality and rhetorical moaning. They are right of course; death is a very bad thing. But religious societies, or societies in which religion is still an active memory, are much better. 'The Fool in the Graveyard' is about the insane thrill that bad news gives, just momentarily, even if it's your own bad news. At least *something* is happening. It's another proof of existence.

**LV**. *Have the Good Word* is your self-description as a poet: 'Those modern gods, the concentration/ Camp authorities, when they had stripped/ You of your clothes, would ask if you/ Had some saving skill which might outweigh/ In value the lead fillings in your teeth:/ If you could sew, or type, or translate/ From one useful language to another.// What I

could offer them is the ability/ to tell people what they want to hear:/ That they will win the war, or that/ Their names will go down in history/ With honour; or that, after their deaths,/ Mourners will kneel at their neat suburban graves,/ Leaving bouquets and plastic immortelles.' It is the second time you mention concentration camps. It is also one of the many times you envisage a graveyard in your mind. Some Desperadoes are tough, aggressive sensibilities, ready to fight and eager to displease. You want to tell people what they want to hear, you say. Your poems are all considerate and very proper (unlike the four-letter word abundance in American poetry, even British, at times). You do shock your readers, like any Desperado, but you do it in an insinuating way: you tell us what we want to hear, and you imply what we might hate, which is this ashy taste of death. What do you think of your more peevish fellow poets, who want to be different from everybody else at all costs? Do you want to be different, meaning to be your own trend? Or do you think you are related to some of your contemporaries? Who would those be? I think Desperadoes are only similar in their dissimilarity. Would you subscribe to a movement thus described?

**BO**. 'Have the good word' is an Irish saying that seems to me to encapsulate a stark difference between Irish and English mores. The rhetorical convention in Ireland is to agree with the interlocutor if possible; in England it's not. As a consequence the English find the Irish duplicitous and the Irish find the English rude (to overstate it). I think it is true that I aim to shock (as in 'O'Regan the Amateur Anatomist') in polite and agreeable language. I think your questions at this point are very astute. As for the contemporaries, in fact I admire people who are able to be more outspoken than I am. I always think that, if I was asked by one of those colour-supplement questionnaires what I don't like about myself, it would be a kind of lack of courage: cowardice even. One of my dearest friends, and one of the literary figures I most admire, is the poet-critic Tom Paulin (he and I are reading with Seamus Heaney in Oxford this Thursday: very intimidating and outclassing) who has the gift of being loved while being outspoken. That poem is I suppose about what service the weak can offer to the strong. It is pretty political I think: quite outspoken after all!

**LV**. The poem *Carolling*, mentions briefly Ceausescu's death. Do you know more than this about Romania?

**BO**. No, I don't know much about Romania (apart from loving its classical music and its women poets, and the painter Grigorescu – oh yes, and its football team! It adds up!) But I was very horrified by the casual international response to the deaths of the Ceausescus. I am sure it was a necessary and important bid for freedom within Romania, but it was greeted by a horrible complacency in the West. 'Another Eastern dictator falls. Have another brandy.' That poem is about the West, not Romania. I have got into mild trouble with reviewers about sounding off ignorantly about distant political issues, especially in relation to Srebrenica in 'Reassurance', and I think they are right in a way. The problem is I think that I am using distant events as moralities in the same way as I use the Middle Ages or the Past. But I do think we have to express political views – what Heaney calls 'redressing' – where we can do it without making things worse.

I think one of the most horrifying moments of my life was switching on the television in 1991 and realising that the Americans really were bombing Baghdad.

**LV**. *The Youngest in the Class* begins with 'modern Ireland', and then remembers 'When I changed nations.' Do you really feel displaced? Are you at home in Oxford? It seems to me the change of places has been one of your spurs into poetry. It is my belief that a Desperado thrives on displacement. The germs of this rootlessness began with the stream of consciousness (Ezra Pound, Henry James, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats). The difference between the two is that the Desperado age takes displacement, like other modern revelations, for granted. A Desperado feels he must leave his first space (mental or geographical) and experience borderlessness. There is a need for universality in a Desperado which reminds us of the Renaissance spirit. Do you feel you could belong anywhere? Do you think of your poetry as intensely national and untranslatable (both in language and meaning)?

**BO**. Whatever about Desperadoes, I think I do thrive on displacement, yes. But for an odd reason that I wrote about in a poem called 'The Migrant Workers' a very long time ago. I like feeling: 'I am happy where I am; but I am glad that I don't feel entirely identified with it – that my centre of gravity is somewhere else.' This hasn't to do with England; to some extent I feel the same in Ireland now (though I love the basic feeling of being there: native ground I suppose). Doesn't everyone like the rather luxurious feeling that they have something in reserve? It is the definition of happiness I think; the opposite of being 'at the end of your tether.' I hadn't thought about this before you formulated the last part of this question, but I quite like the feeling of being temporarily lost. Though not linguistically: I don't like being out of touch where I don't speak the language. That happened to me once briefly in Berlin. I didn't mind that much; but I once flew to the wrong Scottish airport without any immediate way of retracing my steps, and I was surprised how unpanicked I was.

**LV**. In your poems, which reenact history, there is a great sense of humour. The characteristic Desperado attitude is irony, but you are gentler and more generous, using this sense of humour. You take everything seriously but nothing is tragic in the end. You are a Desperado because of this combination of enthusiasm and fear. One eye smiles, another sheds a tear. Do your critics appreciate this mixture? Are you satisfied with the way critics have treated you so far? What do you expect from a critic (being one yourself)? Could you draw the profile of the ideal critic as you see him (both with the eyes of the poet and the medievalist)?

**BO**. Enthusiasm and fear; that is very interesting. You are right about humour; my favorite writers are comic (Chaucer, Flann O'Brien, Waugh). Even writers who are mostly admired for moral seriousness I find most effective when they

are funny: Joyce and Beckett, who are pretty well my favorite writers of all (with Chaucer). I suppose I haven't experienced that much criticism. I am always very pleased when people have read things closely. 'Dogs, would you live for ever?' which I find painful of course (and would never read for example) was read with extraordinary insight by Ruth Padel in the *Sunday Independent* which I was very grateful but a bit unnerved by. A critic I admired, Bill Scammell, died recently. He salvaged all my books, and said about *Gunpowder* that it was a bit of a waste of time but 'contained one unquestionable success, 'The Iron Age Boat at Caumatruish' which I thought was better than just saying 'Okay I suppose' to the whole thing. A lot of my poems came through a poetry society called the Florio Society, run by John Fuller at Magdalen College here where I worked. The best critics I have ever come across were the close readers who analysed seriously there. I think a lot of the best critics do not want to be poets themselves (like Nicholas Jenkins of *The Auden Review* for example). It is difficult in criticism to find the balance between being open-minded and being dull. The critic needs a point of view; but it shouldn't make them hostile to their text. It does of course, inevitably. I grew up in an age (the 1960s) when criticism was much more highly regarded among students of literature than 'creative writing' which was thought pretentious. I think that was healthy. I still hate people who call themselves poets. They don't introduce themselves as drivers because they can drive a car, do they?

**LV**. *Going without Saying* is a remarkable poem, which X-rays your sensibility: 'It is a great pity we don't know/ When the dead are going to die/ So that, over a last companionable/ Drink, we could tell them/ How much we liked them.// Happy the man who, dying, can/ Place his hand on his heart and say:/ 'At least I didn't neglect to tell/ The thrush how beautifully he sings.' I have a feeling this sounds like a lesson to literary critics. Do you favour any particular critical approach? What kind of a critic are you? I have often wondered what the Desperado critic should look like, as most Desperado authors are terribly choosy and contemptuous of anyone who approaches their work. Would you agree that, first and last, criticism ought to be literature, too, and that, before any other goals, it should aim at being clear, at showing a way of reading , not dissecting the work with scholarly zest?

**BO**. 'Going without Saying' was a response to the death of a wonderful man who committed suicide at 45. He was an industrial chemist, very successful professionally, with a terrific wife and children. He left his wife (apparently: of course I didn't see it) a deeply consoling and admiring last letter. So it's all very private and context-bound. Insofar as that can be applied to criticism, I have always thought it is quite a good maxim to be able to see what is good about something before setting out to say what's bad about it. I am putting this very inaccurately – but Christopher Ricks said something like 'There's no good Eliot and Leavis showing us why Milton is no good because anyone can see that he IS good, so they must be starting from the wrong place.' I think that is right. Mind you, if writers are self-admiring and self-righteous, it may be difficult to find anything good to say about them! But we should at least try. (There is an

academic joke about the referee who is desperately trying to write something nice about a candidate for a job and says in a last paragraph, 'Finally, his wife is absolutely delightful'. So faint praise may be damnation of course.)

**LV.** *Nechtan* says something about 'being homesick/ For Ireland.' I come back to the idea of displacement, only to place you in a long tradition of Irish writers (Swift, Shaw, Joyce, Yeats, Casey, Heaney...) Does that affect you in any way? Aside from the fact that your poems are very local as well as universal, what do you think might make you belong to that line of writing?

**BO**. I once had a student (called Helen Mulley) who was a very good folksinger, and she once introduced an Irish song (she was English) by saying 'You don't have to be Irish to be homesick for Ireland'. I think that's right: something about Ireland's culture and history leads to that emotion. Louis MacNeice is another in that tradition, more surprisingly. I suppose that is universal, but there are sentiments that seem particular to one country or another, aren't there? Italy is romantic for instance; France has style: that kind of thing. Someone said that nostalgia is not properly an emotion at all; it is a learned response. What MacNeice said was : 'If only one could live in Ireland or feel oneself in England'. I don't feel that of course; I am very happy in Ireland. But it is an astute way of putting it. England is a comfortable, supportive place to live, with this great weight of history behind it. You feel in England 'For good or ill, this is what living means'. It is not marginal.

**LV**. Your poems are more flashes than real stories. Flashes of your past. Which explains why I cannot easily say you are a narrative poet, but I am not ready to label you as a merely lyrical recorder, because you do use hybridization. Considering your flirtatious approach to displacement, dystopia, hybridization, your desire to be different, conversational tone, apparent need for privacy, precious clarity, gleams of upgraded stream of consciousness, and, at last, considering the fact that your three volumes can be grouped together in a book (I am not naming the literary genre) that reenacts a coherent rendering of another time, another place, another manner than the rest can boast of, I think I have quite a number of arguments in favour of calling you a Desperado. What would your reaction be to this attempt at labelling your work?

**BO**. I think that is a staggeringly attentive summary of the things I go on with. As I have said above I am very grateful for your attentiveness. I am very intrigued by the category because (as I said before) I think the English connotations of Desperado are not at all how I see myself – it implies something more wild and dashing than me! But I do think your deconstructing the three titles ingenious and persuasive (there was a previous book that fits even better, called *Poaching Rights*: i.e. the idea of poachers having rights as much as fishermen have, as in the phrase 'fishing rights'; I

suppose it is claiming the right to be transgressive in some way, like Judas as the patron of outsiders in ‘The Potter’s Field’). I wonder what the genre might be called? Is it a kind of parody memoir, like ‘My Childhood’? Very interesting.

March 27, 2001

## Pascale Petit, *Your definition of a desperado poet suits me*

Interview with **PASCALE PETIT** (born 20 December 1953), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** After reading *The Zoo Father* I can only say poetry with a story behind lyricism is the strongest. Whether this is a personal, private story or an assumed, very often cultured (intertextual) one makes all the difference. I have learned from the best Desperado poets (as I call them, but I will try to explain the idea soon) that private hell makes the best of poems. Biography *is* important. Not many poets resort to it, though; not any more. Women poets used to be very generous with their own experiences. Do you think biography and poetry go hand in hand?

**PASCALE PETIT:** Thank you for your generous comments! In the UK, very personal intense poetry is treated with suspicion by some. However, I write what I am compelled to write, and hope that explorations of my childhood 'private hell' are of relevance to readers. There are entire countries undergoing private hells much worse than mine, but in a first world country this is sometimes forgotten. I write about oppression from both my parents, though *The Zoo Father* focuses on my father. I was in Lithuania recently, and someone there at a conference compared my poem 'My Father's Body' (where I shrink him to reduce his power) to a Lithuanian regaining power over a KGB agent. He said the particularity of the content of that poem wasn't important. What was important was what the poem was doing, and how readers could relate it to injustices in their own lives. I think when a poet has strong personal subject matter to work with, then they've got something to write about, and that helps to make poems vivid. Of course it's how they write about it that really counts. There's a stigma attached to 'confessional' poetry here, so generally, people – women included – steer clear of it if at all possible.

**LV**. Desperado poetry has many features, one of them being the need of all these poets to be similar in dissimilarity, to become their own trend. I do not find the label Postmodernism apt or significant any longer, and am trying to find another way of putting it. You are a Desperado poet, I think, because of the violence of your words and emotions, because you are brave enough to use all words that are often avoided, because you charge language with a tension of the heart that almost breaks the page. The unbearable is, to my mind, a Desperado aim. You reach that point. Would this description of your poetry as Desperado make you accept the label for yourself?

**PP**. Yes, your definition of a Desperado poet suits me. My poetry is a poetry of extremes, I've never been one for lukewarmth. Tension too – nothing relaxed about the homes I describe. I hope tension creates drama, that I create

dramatic tension, that I somehow transform uncomfortable tension into highly charged art. Isn't a lot of human experience unbearable? I find art is a wonderful release from that.

**LV**. Since I know very little about you, when were you born? What was your education? What is your profession? I understand you grew up in France. I understand that 'zoo' father means animal instincts running loose. Is this your own story?

**PP**. I was born in Paris, grew up in France and Wales. My happiest childhood memories are of living with my grandmother in Mid-Wales (she was half Welsh/Irish and half Asian Indian). My memories of Paris are grim. When I was a teenager I lived with my mother in South Wales and that was awful. From an early age I decided to become an artist and/or poet. I refused to look for more sensible options, even though I came from a poor family. I went to art school and ended up becoming a sculptor though I was also writing poems. I did my MA in sculpture at the Royal College of Art. Eventually I stopped making sculptures and concentrated on poems. I am also poetry editor of *Poetry London*. The *Zoo Father* is my story, though much altered. 'Zoo' father does not mean 'animal instincts running loose'! Animals are cruel but good! It's human instincts that are the problem, human instincts running loose.

**LV**. Your respect for your reader is remarkable. Your lines are both clear and ambiguous. You convey but never confess. I somehow know the experience you are writing about, although the facts of the story remain hidden. This is true poetry. What brought you to literature? Why did you feel the need to write poetry? Why poetry and not fiction?

**PP**. From teenage onwards, I knew my life was about creating alternative worlds where I could live luxuriously, like Keats' mansions in the mind. I knew what he meant and that that was what I had to make. I started doing this when I lived with my mother, to escape from her. I think poems do this better than fiction. In any case, life is stranger than fiction. I'm interested in strangeness. Having been a sculptor, I do have a need to make my poems solidly, to shape them as one would a sculpture, to make them self-contained and physical, as real as possible. The alternative world must be at least as real as the 'real' world, to invite me, and then the reader, in.

**LV**. This volume is a dialogue with your own image of a dying, then dead father. The experience of death is somehow an explanation of your hopelessness: you talk without hoping for an answer, although each word fervently wishes it. You write a mute poetry, if that can be said about such eloquent verse. When everything is said and done, there is still a poignant core of silence needing to be spelled out. The reader follows this diary of memories and suffering (past and present) with one question in mind: How has she come out of it? Who is she now? Who are you now, after this volume uttered by an 'I' who is denied all answers?

**PP**. When my father contacted me, I hadn't seen him for thirty-five years and I had no expectation of ever doing so. When I went to visit him I discovered he was dying of emphysema. He was on an oxygen machine. Breathing was hard, talking even more so. I was disappointed with how little he told me about his life. So the poems were a substitute, a dialogue as you say. I was appalled and fascinated by the breathing struggle, and also saw it as the Amazon struggling to breathe. How did I come out of it? Who am I now? Not anyone much until the next book has a strong shape. I tend to live through the art, which isn't very sensible. My next book has a number of explorations, but one thing I want to do in it is write about my mother in a way that satisfies me. The closest I've got so far is in a sequence of her as a rattlesnake – the plumed serpent – she was scary and is much harder to write about than my father. Psychological abuse is harder to write about than sexual abuse, but in many ways it's worse. Talking about terrorism – much to my surprise, I find I'm now writing poems about 9/11, after a recent visit to New York. And I've written a sequence of poems about Frida Kahlo, which feels rather like I've sneaked off to do some painting, though of course I'm pretending they're hers!

**LV**. Your poems are clear in style, even though their intention is hardly ever revealed. I mean to say that a reader can easily make sense of what you say, although understanding your imagery is a totally different matter. Like all good poets, you use clear language in order to veil an elusive meaning, the one truth that you will never be willing to utter. What is your attitude versus those contemporary poets whom one can hardly understand? One can read some poems and never be able to put words together, never make sense, find the subject and the predicate, share a common form of communication. In short, what do you think about poets who could not care less about their readers, who do not express themselves clearly enough?

**PP**. I'm pleased you find my poems clear. I wanted the story to be clear, and the poems as accessible as possible. I don't understand why some poets wish to be obscure – life's complicated enough. I think clarity is important, the reader should be able to glide over the surface, and choose whether to dive into the depths.

**LV**. Is literary criticism necessary to poetry today? Is scholarly criticism any help to the understanding of a poem? Is literary criticism supposed to parrot abstract terms that demonstrate a mathematical theory of the critic, instead of finding new words for each poet, instead of becoming itself part of literature? Should criticism be literature or not?

**PP**. I don't read much literary criticism, so am not qualified to comment on it. I'm not really interested in academia. Most of my reading is non-fiction (natural history etc.) and poetry. When a really good poet writes literary criticism then it's a valuable contribution, but I'm not sure it's 'necessary to poetry today'. Isn't it poems that comment on poetry today, as well as all the other stuff they do?

**LV**. What poets are your literary friends? Whom do you feel you would like to be grouped with?

**PP**. My ideal literary friends would be: Les Murray, Peter Redgrove, Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds, Robert Minhinnick, Tomas Transtromer, Selima Hill, Sujata Bhatt, and many, many others whose work I admire.

**LV**. You belong to the new generation of poets, for whom Eliot is a remote influence, if at all. Who influenced you? What helped you find your own poetic voice?

**PP**. I don't think I have direct influences among my contemporaries. As a teenager, I was into Keats, Coleridge, Shakespeare (the plays). I adored them. I was in love with Keats. Then I was influenced by the French symbolists – Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé. To this day I still like a poet to have a system of symbols, an image-bank that furnishes his/her world. By far the biggest influence on my work is Amazonian indigenous cultures. I've travelled twice to Venezuela, and read everything I can find on the Amazon – its ethnobotany, fauna, shamanism, initiation rites, myths.

**LV**. What are the characteristic features of poetry today, in your opinion? What makes your poems so very different from Yeats, Eliot, even Larkin or Hughes?

**PP**. The first question is too big! It's marvellously various! And I've not much thought about the second. I don't compare myself to them, though I think one of the reasons I don't is because they're men. And they're the standard of excellence – I mean, male poets are the standard. Apart from the gender thing, there's also the fact that I'm not British, and haven't looked to British poetry for models. I've looked more to America, Europe, Australia… So, to try and answer you: I don't have British roots, nor any firm roots, I'm an outsider; I don't try to vie with the male tradition – I just do my own thing. The poet I'm closest to in your list is Hughes, because of his passion for the natural world and exploration of violence, and his myth-making. It seems immodest to even compare myself to him, but I guess one contrast with him is that I look out of Britain for my imagery and landscapes, and his language is more Anglo-Saxon than mine, muscular maybe, while what I'm after is a kind of chant.

**LV**. I have read quite a number of remarkable women poets the last few years. Would you say feminine poetry has come to maturity, has developed as never before? Would it be correct to state that one feature of Desperado poetry is the coming of age of feminine verse?

**PP**. Yes! After the struggles of feminism, women poets are now much more relaxed, and ambitious. At last!

**LV**. When included in an anthology, which of your poems would you recommend and why?

**PP**. I'm always interested to see which of my poems editors pick. I have my favourites – poems in *The Zoo Father* that I read most at readings, because I feel they have that 'chant' quality, and are therefore easier to read. These are: 'The Strait-Jackets', 'Self-Portrait with Fire Ants', 'The Ant Glove', and 'Self-Portrait as a Yanomami Daughter'. These poems also tell the story clearly, however mysterious the imagery.

**LV**. Are interviews helpful? Can they build a bridge between poet and reader?

**PP**. It is fascinating reading interviews with poets or artists, just to see how their minds work, and how they make their art. So in that way I think interviews are useful.

**LV**. Can you think of a question that you would have liked to be asked but have not?
**PP**. No, sorry.

**LV**. If you had any power over your life and work, how would you arrange them, what would you make happen?

**PP**. Less money worries or money-making work getting in the way. I'd like to be much physically stronger so I could do a lot more without getting tired, like travel freely in very remote places. And I'd like a cure for insomnia!

**LV**. Is this third millennium a favourable age for poetry? Do you see an increase in the number of poetry readers in the near future?

**PP**. There'll be more leisure time but will people want to make the effort of reading poetry? Depends how it's taught at schools.

**LV**. Can the internet help promoting poetry? Is an internet page a useful idea to the poets who would like to probe other poetic manners, to the writers who want to contact others, to the readers who see their way into a poet's work after reading an internet interview?

**PP**. Yes, the internet helps, particularly as it's global. I resisted it for a long time, and find it so useful now, but I do wonder about the long term alienating effects of people researching and working on a screen rather than physically.

**LV**. Is the screen going to defeat the book?

**PP**. As long as there are poets – no, the screen can't compete with the pleasure of reading a real book.

January 1, 2003

## Peter Redgrove, *Ideally criticism is more literature*

Interview with **PETER REDGROVE** (2 January 1932 - 2003), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**. Your poetry is ‘an agony of imagination,’ to use the first line of your poem *Old House*. Your clarity – which is a major Desperado feature – is of a special kind. You do not narrate explicitly, as most poets do today, and you do not confess directly. You encode everything you have to say in agonizing images, all on the point of bursting with intensity. Your power is in the image. This was very much the case of T.S. Eliot and the stream of consciousness. The Desperado age migrated towards accessibility. You mix encoded emotion with flashes of directness. What do you think of the poets who have almost given up images in favour of orality? What is the use of their poetry? What is the nature of yours?

**PETER REDGROVE**: I am a thinker by things. An injudicious mingling of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, as I inspect my brew. I move in the crossings of my poetry (of Bloom on Stevens) towards synaesthesia and back again, the sixth sense.

**LV**. Like T.S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath, you find a meaning in Lazarus. The connection does not go farther than a superficial remark, because, unlike them, you see Lazarus physically recording his death: ‘...I knew the soil in my limbs and the rain-water/ In my mouth’, ‘...The knotted roots/ Would have entered my nostrils and held me/ By the armpits’ (*Lazarus and the Sea)*. Death is a recurrent obsession in your poetry. Your brother died young (*Memorial*). As you say, ‘He’s ashes/ Like this cigarette I smoke into grey dryness.’ Cremation appears again in *Warm Stone for N*. Yet your poetry is strong and liberating, not oppressive. Is death the mere dystopia of your imagination? Is it a haunting fear for the poet?

**PR**. We rehearse for the big death through the little death of orgasm, through erotic living. Death as transfiguration. Lazarus, like Dracula, knows the thresholds and how to pass them. The Desperado desperately wants to do this, does it in one way or another.

**LV**. A Desperado poet takes refuge from the elliptical concentration of Eliotian poems into a hyper-clarity. You resort to a sophisticated conversational (in)directness, meaning that you communicate by means of a certain rhythm of

images. You offer an intuitive, not merely verbal clarity. Actually, you avoid verbal, prosaic accessibility. Is it a concern of yours not to communicate in poetry unless it is by means of images?

**PR**. Well said.

**LV**. Your poetry is, in good Desperado tradition, though you may not accept the term, dystopic in sensibility. There is always a hidden menace at the far end of the room which encloses your poetic mood. *Expectant Father* states: ' Darkness stands for death, and how afraid of sleep I am;/ And fearing thus, thus I fall fast asleep.' Your imagination is not a solar one, yet the all-round impression is one of positive strength. Your major experience is the joy of creation, which fights the dark images, or those which are too much in earnest. Do you consider yourself a tragic/ hopeful/ ironic poet?

**PR**. Surely the Desperado mode is high comedy. It's not so much dystopia as unfamiliarity, and the belief that it will all make sense through poetry. There is poetry that magnifies ordinary life, and poetry that transfigures it. We hold to our purpose, desperately.

**LV**. *Sweat* is a poem of tenderness. You are a tender poet, in spite of your sharp images. You are also a poet with 'a quest' (*The Case*). Is poetry a gift or hard work for you? Is it enough to feel, or do you have to carve at the words painstakingly till the meaning of your quest comes to life?

**PR**. The meaning of my quest can be found in *The Black Goddess*. I do, I suppose, carve at the words until the quest becomes visible.

**LV**. I wonder what your relation with Eliot is. I detect an echo from him in *The Case*: 'It mixes dying with flowering.' Otherwise, your poems are far from Eliot's theatrically encoded emotion. Your emotions are direct, claiming simplicity. Was Eliot a master or a pattern to be rejected? Would you consider *The Waste Land* a major experience? Do you consider Eliot the father of modern and contemporary poetry, or should we stop at modern?

**PR**. Eliot and Langland were the first people who made me want to write. *Four Quartets*; and the plays, for metre. In a somer season made my hair stand up. A master.

**LV**. *The Moon Disposes* has one line about death as life: 'The dead are beautiful and give us life.' It is a Desperado temptation to play with the feeling, not the fear of death. Eliot may have started it, with his obsession with death

imagery in most of his poems. Peter Dale, Bernard O'Donoghue, George Szirtes, Alan Brownjohn, to name just a few Desperado poets whom I have interviewed, cram experience into the thought of death and take refuge in it, as in a strange, appealing land, a dystopia of their own imagination. Yeats preferred to ignore death, on the other hand. What exactly does the idea of death, as a poetic idea, mean to you? What emotions do you attach to it?

**PR**. I died fifty times in resooce to insulin shock treatment when I was a boy.

**LV**. Your poem *Or Was That When I Was Grass*, like many others, reminds me of John Donne and all metaphysical poetry. One line goes, '...I began to remember the man// I had fed on as a maggot or was that when I was grass...' Are you aware of any connections between you and metaphysical poets? Would it be right to say that most contemporary (Desperado) poets have a metaphysical love of life?

**PR**. Well put – we have a metaphysical love of life.

**LV**. Eliot devised cultured poetry and, since *The Waste Land,* it has become an everyday habit of poetry. Poets allow their memory to quote at random and with deliberate approximation. You do not quote much, but enjoy the atmosphere of the mind. *Into the Rothko Installation* begins with a description of the joy of art: 'Dipping into the Tate/ As with the bucket of oneself into a well/ Of colour and odour, to smell the pictures/ And the people steaming in front of the pictures,/ To sniff up the odours of the colours, which are/ The fragrances of people excited by the pictures.' Your poetry is pictorial to a large extent. Do you see images when you feel like writing a poem, or does it come as a mood that has to be conveyed by words?

**PR**. My *Incubator* will tell you.

**LV**. The *Who's Who 2001* states you are also an analytical psychologist. Your poems are indeed attempts at plunging into the depths of consciousness. You have a whole cycle about your own childhood, too. What did you study and is there any connection between your professional and poetic interests?

**PR**. Trained by world class against John Layard. The *Wise Wound* and *Alchemy for Women* came out of practical work.

**LV**. Paternity is a source of illuminating tenderness. Being a son to your parents brings less emotion to the lines, and more awe when faced with the tricks memory can play. I could draw the conclusion that you like it when you are in

control of emotion and not the other way round. Are you a sober poet, in your opinion? An introvert whose words betray secrets that otherwise would weigh the poet down?

**PR**. Fairly sober, as poets go, but excitable.

**LV**. Angela Carter wrote, ‘Redgrove’s language can light up the page.’ Which very well expresses the strength at the core of your poetry. Does this forceful feeling come from the soul, the mind or both? Are you an intellectual poet or do you prefer being looked upon as a creator of experience?

**PR**. Discoverer of experience.

**LV**. What kind of criticism of your poetry do you approve of? Should criticism be literature, too, or must it be scientific appraisal of the original text? Do you approve of critics with a jargon?

**PR**. I like criticism to expound. See *The Dreamer, the Lover and the Poet* by Neil Roberts (Sheffield Academic Press) which expounds my work. Ideally criticism is more literature. Fellowship.

**LV**. Your poems contain a world. When you look back, what would you have liked to write about but is not there yet? What have you kept in store for the future?

**PR**. God.

**LV**. Would you include your work in any trend or do you feel you are on your own?

**PR**. You may or may not trace certain trends which it is sometimes said I started. Look out for stepped verse, as in my new book due next year *From the Virgil Caverns*. Also *The Black Goddess* contains numerous starting-points.

**LV**. I think the Desperado age brings together authors who are only similar by their dissimilarity. I mean by Desperado a strong creator – which you are – who takes the law in his own hands, makes his rules and wants his work to be unlike everything ever written. The Desperadoes need to be unique, and are unafraid to claim what is theirs, namely the right to keep coming up with heaps of unheard of devices. Your own poems are fireworks of devices never used before in that particular way. You are, in short, a very original poet and a very strong one, also willing to oppose uniformity. The question is, would you accept being called a Desperado?

**PR**. Too much ego. I do not wish to be unique, rather member of a fellowship that is understood as a community and read so.

It was a dark and stormy night
And the Brigands sat round the fire –
Desperado said
‘Tell us a story’
And the story ran as follows...

May 2001

## Carol Rumens, *I feel I am on my own*

Interview with **CAROL RUMENS** (born 10 December 1944), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: Your poetry is shyly autobiographical. I have a theory of my own, which groups contemporary poets under the label of *Desperadoes*, which is just a name for a number of features, one of which is the fact that you cannot stop at one poem by any of such poets, you cannot quote them by bits. You have to read a whole volume, if not all volumes, to appease the sense of suspense of experience that they offer, far more than any predecessors. Your volume *The Greening of the Snow Beach* (Bloodaxe Books, 1988) is a perfect example. I simply could not put it down once I had opened it. Are you aware of the fictional interest it arouses? Did you mean for this to happen? Would you agree that contemporary poetry is far more flooded by the narrative than it used to be? Are you interested in autobiography, diary or just story-telling when you write a volume of poems?

**CAROL RUMENS:** *The Greening of the Snow Beach* is not typical of my work. It was a one-off, intended as a celebration of my relationship with my partner and my first trip to Russia, and then I added the dedication to my partner's father. There is a story there but it's not linear. I liked the idea of mixing media, with a block of prose journal and autobiographical images included. It's not a very defined shape, I feel. Normally I would bring a lot of diverse material to a new collection. I arrange it but not to create a narrative, exactly. I think about harmony and variation and sustaining the reader's interest with contrast. Inevitably, events from my own life underlie much of my writing but I am not making a story of them. I slightly regret that I have never felt able to compile a book of poems that has strong narrative design. But I have written a novel (*Plato Park*, 1988) and various short stories, and now I write plays. So I feel that poetry is for my more lyric moments.

**LV**. You talk about travelling at an early age, but I detect a shade of diffidence, maybe fear, when you visit Russia in 1987. Your perception of dying communism is incredibly correct. The iron curtain is perfectly illustrated in your poems. The wife of the imprisoned dissident writer, the fear of foreigners, the rules and the terror of silence, you do not miss one essential element. What other ex-communist countries have you seen and what in your biography makes you understand them so well and want to write about that experience?

**CR.** Yes, it was a big challenge to go around on my own and meet new people. But it wasn't as difficult as a previous errand to Prague (I went to Czechoslovakia several years before I went to Russia.) I was working as a messenger for

Palach Press – they published a journal about human rights abuses, which I helped edit (see the poem dedicated to Jan Kavan in *Thinking of Skins*). This was much more frightening because I was smuggling in letters, books, money, etc. The people I was visiting could have been in serious trouble had I been caught and questioned. The poem 'A Prague Dusk' is about that time. I suppose it was talking to people from the Communist Bloc countries that chiefly informed my work – Jan himself, my partner, Yuri. I read everything I could find, too: history, fiction, anything.

I did not travel much when I was younger. My background is lower middle class. My family didn't even have a car!

**LV**. You quote Burgess, with *Honey for the Bears*. I can also detect a vague Eliot ring here and there, seldom but sure. What writers do you value, who would you say was a standard for you? What contemporary poets do you appreciate? Whom do you feel closer to you, from a literary point of view?

**CR.** I am most interested in the Northern Irish poets: Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, Ciaran Carson, Michael Longley. I read a lot of poetry, of course, but I no longer feel close to anyone. I feel I am on my own – in England the poetry scene is a particularly alien place. I don't know enough about the Welsh 'scene' yet.

**LV**. You write: 'The best way of getting talking to Russians is to join a queue.' You have a unique gift of blending in, of becoming one with the landscape, of writing about it as if it were an inner reality of yours. I am not sure a direct question would be welcome and I have no way of rephrasing what I really want to know. There is one fascinating character in this Russian volume, Kolya. Who is he, besides having defected from Russia? He is an emotional mountain in your biography, yet the poems hide most of it and the peak we see is very intriguing. Would you be willing to say more in this interview?

**CR.** 'Kolya' is my partner Yuri. We have been together for almost 20 years. We translated some poems of Yevgeny Rein recently. He and I are just two of a team of translators in that publication.

**LV**. *A Moscow Wife, Waiting* is a perfect poem, which ought to be quoted in full, and I will, for those who have not read it:

Husbands wait sometimes, too:
But when I think of waiting,
I think only of you,

As if you were the true
Symbol of all waiting
And all who wait are you,

Larissa. And I see
The blackish lumps of snow
Surging to your dark porchway,

The flats in rows, the stairs
In hundreds, and I climb
Praying you'll be there,

Praying you won't be there.
I hear the clattered chains –
It's like a prison-door.

You peep an inch. I'm scared
I've scared you – and just scared.
But then – I've stepped inside.

You sit and listen, pale
Distracted. You look ill.
The message falters. No,

It isn't much. I can't
Say much. And there's a word
Which you repeat and which

Baffles me. That it means
The most important thing
For you is all I know.

'I'm sorry.' I bring out

My pocket dictionary.
The word is *amnesty*.

You said ‘I think there’s hope.’
You didn’t smile. I said
‘I’m glad.’ The words seemed small.

I took your hand, I went
Into the sleety cold.
And now I learn that hope

Was simply one more way
Of torturing you: they’ve sent
Your husband back to camp.

And yes, he’s waiting, too;
But when I think of waiting
Somehow I think of you

As if you were the true
Symbol of all waiting,
And all who wait are you.

You also write poems with obvious rhyme and rhythm, but this poem, devoid of all complicated sonority and loaded with emotion and sympathy, goes very deep. Does poetry imply musicality for you? Is there a new music that you feel you need to devise? A music of shyness and of the commonplace, maybe? You are reticent in everything you write. You avoid big words and also vulgar words, which have become common coin. Do you deliberately choose the tone and language of your poems or do you follow your instinct?

**CR.** I felt shy in this poem, writing about a real person, a dissident writer’s wife. But you are probably right that I write low-key and simply most of the time – or I certainly used to. My new poems are a bit more flashy! It was a hard lesson to learn because when I was much younger I went in for rhetoric and big effects. It was kicked out of me at a writing-workshop I attended. But now I am finding that voice again, with, I hope, a slightly more restrained and mature tone! I

do try to keep close to my spoken diction, even now. I have to be able to say the poems aloud and feel them naturally in my mouth.

**LV**. Solitude is the main mood of your poems. Even when you write about your two daughters you are alone, separate from the rest of the world. Ireland is your poetic loneliness. You seem to enjoy it precisely because it resembles that 'single desk' you were once punished to sit in, memory which has made you prefer 'small islands to large.' Do you feel alone when you write? Is writing a way of exorcising loneliness, among other things?

**CR.** I don't feel alone when I write, unless the work is going badly. I feel I have all the company I could possibly want. I like a certain amount of solitude in my life, but enjoy sociable patches here and there.

**LV**. You have a more than memorable line: 'nothing at all to keep me/ From language...' Your language is clear and does not hide behind puzzles, does not hunt for intricate half-rhymes or rhymes out of the ordinary. Your naturalness is baffling. You write as you breathe, the poem seems to require no effort on your part. Do you write with difficulty? Is the act of writing an abrupt rise or a gently sloping hill, on top of which you lie at ease in a meadow? Do you write with fear or gentleness in your soul?

**CR.** I couldn't generalise – it's never quite the same and often very different. Few of my poems come right straight away. I work intensely, in short bursts. Sometimes I give the commands, mostly I listen to them. Writing demands a give and take between passive and active elements in the self.

**LV**. Love is muffled by discretion in your poems. Most contemporary poets cry out loud when wounded and rejoice at having reason to scream. You whisper, but your voice is far more impressive because it commands more attention and effort to listen. The reader cannot help but share your frailty. Do you think of yourself as a strong being, a rough poet? What image would you like to convey of yourself?

**CR.** I am not at all interested in conveying an image of myself. Only when I give a reading – then, I try to look casual and yet interesting! I am strong in my commitment to poetry. It has been and still is a long quest. I have been tough in making space for it. But I am not naturally strong in any other way! I make efforts to be brave but frequently succumb to panic!

**LV**. Politics is apparently in disgrace with you. You mock at political parties that somehow remind you of Gulliver and his travels. Yet you are so open-eyed when you notice its human dimension, when you describe Russian victims of

politics. Should poetry be concerned with political life or should it keep out of it? You seem to be doing both, by some inexplicable charm. Where do you place yourself? A fighting or a submissive poet?

**CR.** I think in my social attitudes I am a fighter. I don't want to write polemic: I don't want to write about what I haven't experienced for myself. So the material available is limited, and the tone must remain true to my voice. But I am angry about many things, and deeply disappointed with the human race. We are incapable of learning from history. I have very little hope for the future. I have begun exploring this in my latest poems.

**LV**. One line goes, 'Looking out on that drenched street my heart...' There is this sadness in everything you write. No buoyant joy in your poems. You prefer quiet meditation and unuttered wounds, hidden from the eye. I do not know the first thing about you. Would you describe your existence to the readers of this interview? Its main experiences, which your poetry mirrors indirectly?

**CR.** I am a disappointed romantic. Not very original – many poets are, I think. I have had many imaginary love-affairs, and behaved very foolishly in sometimes not realising how very imaginary they were – but they gave me poems and perhaps that was what I really wanted. This so-called love has been a great energy source for my poetry.

**LV**. You claim, 'I'll/ author an honest tear.' So you do. Your poetry is honest and what we are left with is a tear. You also claim you 'open the veins of speech.' One other, more recent poem states, 'I'm a woman, English, not young.' Desperado poetry always carries a burden, and this burden is another one for each poet, of course. Which burden is yours? What don't you want to state in verse, so that the reader may infer and be sucked into it?

**CR.** My burden is me!

**LV**. You mention concentration camps several times. You also mention a foreign accent of some ancestor. I may be wrong in trying to build this detective story. Is there a family tale behind these poems?

**CR.** No, no family tale. I learned about the Nazi concentration camps through film and TV at a young impressionable age. Perhaps this gives me the real answer to your previous question. Human evil (including mine, of course).

**LV**. Another line goes, 'I'm due for demolition.../ That's why I stand in the Poetry Section...' You remember a Hebrew class in Dresden, with the warmth of childhood suffusing it. You talk about an 'emigrée' who muses, 'I have no

passport, there’s no way back at all...’ You have translated poetry from Russian. Presumably you know the language quite well. How did you learn it? When?

**CR.** In ‘The Hebrew Class’ it is the ice formations on the pavements that make me imagine a miniature ruined Dresden. It’s not very clear I’m afraid but the poem is set in London. I learnt a little Hebrew in my empathy for Judaism, and, later, spent time on a Kibbutz. In the lines about having no passport I’m using a metaphor for loving a forbidden person.

My Hebrew now is non-existent, and my Russian sadly small. I work very closely with Yuri when we translate. My interest in Russia began when I bought *Dr Zhivago*. I was 16 and I’d won a prize for music, a book token. I remember picking up this heavy, yellow-covered hardback, with the strange title and strange author’s name, unsure if I’d like it. And then I found *poems* in it! I was utterly entranced.

**LV**. Desperadoes are apparently crystal clear, both in fiction and in poetry. So is your work. Apparently no secret, the sentences offer themselves to the reader with no scholarly locks. But the end of a volume is a huge question mark. You reveal nothing, you merely brush the unutterable. Since this is not a poem but a piece of prose, what is your poetic credo? What is most important for the poet Carol Rumens: write clearly, hide pain, win the reader, share emotion without deconspiring it?

**CR.** To be true to myself and true to the language. That’s my overall desire. But I change objectives at different times, even in different poems written on the same day. I might want clarity in one, a mask of metaphor in another, special musical effects in yet another. The first few drafts of a poem are always just for myself. But there is a later stage, when I do consider how the work will be shared, i.e. read. And I would hate to think I had no readers. I have only a few but they are deeply important to me. I hope they feel invited into my poems: they can live how they like there, rearrange the furniture, etc. I don’t mind as long as they come!

2001

**Eva Salzman, *Cleverness has become the new altar on which we may sacrifice too many poems***

Interview with **EVA SALZMAN** (born 20 April 1960), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: Unlike anyone else in contemporary poetry, you write, I suspect, as you dance. Your poems are passionate whirls and your rhythm is that of the winding body, starving for communication of moods through gestures/words. You were a dancer from the age of ten to twenty-two. Are you still? Why poetry? Instead of or along dancing?

**EVA SALZMAN**: I wonder if I can cover this in a suitably condensed form. Why dance and poetry indeed? Hmmmm. Never could figure it out myself. Apparently I danced from a very early age and was then sent to lessons, as all well brought-up girls should be! Soon, I was giving command performances in my grandmother's living room. So, success came early! I loved studying formal technique, especially Martha Graham's, which offered a discipline and opportunity to indulge the drama queen in me. With both the poetry and the dance, I instinctively felt the need for the expression to be channeled through a form and structure that somehow justifies those indulgent influences one must never confess to!

Aside from the odd Salsa class, any dancing I do now is in the privacy of my or someone else's living room – usually not so private, since the occasion is usually a party. Living rooms are the extent of my stage aspirations. One early dance I choreographed dealt with my mixed feelings about the bowing to applause. I mean it felt *too* good, so I wanted to shove away that part of my ego. The piece was called 'Riot' and at the end of it I exited by a side door, not returning to acknowledge my audience. Rude, huh? I wish I were doing more dance classes – once bitten…I miss it. I sometimes long for Tea Dances, except it'd have to have Salsa, jitterbug, the odd waltz. In my last full collection, *Bargain with the Watchman*, all of the muses I summoned obediently attended – except Terpsichore (I think I'll have to add the Muse of Stubbornness to my muse repertoire.). The muse of dance simply wouldn't put in an appearance, almost to spite this earlier life of mine: 'The hell with your poetry – I'm a *dancer*.' Finally, in her own good time, she showed.

**LV**. You were born in New York and moved to Britain in 1985. This is the old road taken by T.S. Eliot, Henry James, Ezra Pound. I am sure, though, you had different motives. Why did you leave New York? Is England a good home to you? Is English poetry a place you like?

**ES**. My motive for moving was a man, so, yes, quite different from the motives of the guys above, unless they have some interesting secret lives. Men usually do. Living in the UK, I suddenly had a strange picture of NYC as being strangely provincial – or parochial, I should say. New Yorkers are passionate and knowledgeable about important things, so long as those important things are themselves. Well, that's a bit harsh. But at that time I was glad to distance myself from what I saw as a uniquely American political naivety and solipsism. After all these years, I've fallen back in love with my hometown – even appreciating the New York arrogance which is a palliative to the stuffy Home Counties English stuff I was living with in Tunbridge Wells – the place I lived the first years I was in the UK. I wrote a lot of really bad poems during that period, informed by the conservatism of that place, and a crappy marriage. The cliché about post-colonial ex-majors in the army and their unhappy wives seemed pretty much true. Nevertheless, I still held on to an idealized view of the European intellectual, considering England as part of Europe; hell, it never occurred to me that someone wouldn't *want* to be part of Europe! And I carried on my literary love affair with England. My first readings were $18^{th}$ and $19^{th}$ century novels, mainly English. I took my time joining modern times, living in a sort of (mainly) Victorian bubble.

English poetry is 'a place I like', as you put it, but I'm not sure it always likes me! Americans are recognized and even feted here, but usually after they're dead. During an Oxford event commemorating the Oxford Poets list, the Bronx poet Michael Donaghy and I, both Oxford poets at that time, sat in the audience listening to English voices reading out absent or dead American writers. We weren't asked to read at all – were, in fact, the only current poets on the list who didn't read that night! That sort of thing makes you wonder.

Sometimes I wonder if the anti-American bias is a hangover from WWII, or something ('overpaid, over-sexed and over here'). Most of us are not overpaid. Pass on the others. People often mistake me for a representative of the US government, especially these days. Can't understand that. I mean, I'm not dressed for that role, for one thing. Okay, Americans are loud and they gesticulate lots. Just like lots of Europeans in fact. But the New Yorkers in particular also have a kind of energy I miss.

Being an outsider in England has made me an outsider back home too. I'm not sorry to be out of the US right now, following September 11. Well, I was sort of sorry to begin with, but a year later…There's more opposition to US government than people think – opposition to the clichéd imperialist, war-mongering, red-neck mentality. What people here don't seem to realize, complaining about the UK media, is how much worse the media is over there; it never reflects much dissent and it's easy for people to thus assume, as they do, that there isn't any. The newspapers are certainly superficial and there aren't that many of them. Aside from National Public Radio, and a few maverick stations – which often have to fight for their little lives. International politics gets a paragraph here or there, but you'd think the US lived in a vacuum. But meet people and go places, and the range of opinion and the genuine-ness of the people makes you think twice about just what this creature is: this American. And, in fact, the marches in the US, in NYC on February 15 this year, were hardly reported in the UK. Many dismissed them as small and inconsequential, but

hundreds of thousands attended in NYC and apparently many thousands couldn't get through the police barriers. In some quarters it's more convenient for people to stick to their generalizations about Americans.

**LV**. Although you were published in an anthology of Jewish women's poetry, nationality does not seem to be an issue in what you write. Where do you feel you belong?

**ES**. Ah, nationality. Like many writers, nowhere and everywhere. Nothing seems to fit perfectly. D.H. Lawrence never settled anywhere, or he settled lots of places then moved on. The Joyces moved around incessantly. The writers you mention maybe recognized their English-ness, and in some ways I can say the same. All New Yorkers are foreigners, so that makes sense. What is a New Yorker, but somebody from somewhere else?

The New Yorker identity is hugely influenced by the two biggest immigrant populations from the end of the last centuries: the Irish and Jews from Eastern Europe. So, while I lived in New York, I never really thought about being Jewish… until I came here and one day realized that there were hardly any Jews around! What a revelation that was, that I'd lived my whole life among Jews without knowing it. Whenever I meet any in England, almost instantly they ask me if I'm Jewish.

I've always felt nationality to be something imposed on me. Maybe you also feel it when it's endangered. The English seem particularly deft at putting you in your place in this way. Since I've lived in the UK, I've been turned into an American, turned into a Jewish writer, turned into a woman writer (that becomes a tag too) – anything, but simply a writer. I have to say that the only anti-Semitism I've ever experienced was on these shores. I'm not painting NYC as some racial utopia, but I honestly didn't grow up noticing people's colour or religion, in the same way that I notice it here, or the way people notice it here and so force me to notice it. I often resent their inability to even recognize how they do this.

So I end up at home in exile, with exiles. I feel myself more comfortable, say, doing an Arts Council readings tour with a panel of writers from India, Egypt and Nigeria, than with English writers. Foreigners. In fact, I feel more affinity with, say, a Muslim writer than with someone from the Home Counties. Ironic, really. I seem to perpetuate this outsider condition without meaning to, working in prisons and with the disenfranchised.

I've become the foreigner in my own country – America being strange to me in precisely the way England used to be. There's a poignant sadness in that situation (as in: 'Why should I be in love with such dazzling sadness' – the line you quote later in the interview! Keats wrote about it too). When I return to Brooklyn Heights, I walk out our front door – on Middagh Street, where Auden lived – and in two minutes I can sit on the promenade, look out over the East River to Wall Street, marvel at the sky-line. (It's awful to say it, but without the twin towers, it's more beautiful; the older buildings are more defined, in relief against the sky: the 1930's buildings, the gothic Woolworth Building, which

was NYC's first real sky-scraper, built in 1912.) I think to myself: I *am* a New Yorker. Never mind: American. New Yorker. Always will be.

A friend, after visiting NYC commented at how surprisingly *religious* a city it was. Some of that is born-again Christian fundamentalism, but some of it that I saw post-September 11, at firemen's funeral processions, resembled the sort of flamboyant Catholicism of Italy or Spain. I've often thought that there should be an organisation for Catholic Jews; Sarah Bernhardt was one. We can all be guilty together, as one. We can compete in small, social circles. It'd be like a leisure sport. (Guilt, as in: *How many Jewish grandmothers does it take to screw in a light bulb – None! I'll sit in the dark!*). and, like a lot of writers, I've been drawn to and fascinated by Catholicism, probably because it's all about sex – every bit of it.

I've always had a lot of Catholic friends – mainly Irish. When I first moved over, I began to take apart my own voice and intonation; the New Yorker's. I began to notice the influence of certain Irish accents: *Tree*, for *Three*, and so forth. Philip Casey, an Irish writer and friend, has made me an honorary Irish writer. That's not the first time that's happened. I feel comfortable among the Irish – feel more comfortable with them than with the English. Doesn't that make sense?! And it's nothing to do with drink. Or so what if it is. Maybe it's even a selfish thing. They tolerate me more, they seem to love me more. And I can be loud around them.

**LV**. Your poems – like most really good Desperado poems – have a recipe: when you want to write a good poem, have something happen in it. This was true of the generation of Alan Brownjohn, mostly. Your generation, poets born in the sixties and a bit earlier, run away from incident to a complication or disembodiment of words which brings confusion. Do you think this is a correct remark? Do you prefer poetry with action in it?
Do the poets who are your age and whom you happen to read do the same?

**ES**. But artists *make* things happen.

**LV**. The poem *Signs* has a line which seems to describe you: 'I'm an unbeliever in so many wondrous things.' Take words, for instance. Here is a remarkable text:

*Air Mail*

Words travel badly.
Unwieldy and hard to fold
into smaller bundles,
they take up far more space

than the grain of their truth would occupy.
Those launched over the ocean to you
careen wildly, collide with other letters,
or return to sender,

packages mauled, shredded and torn into strips.
Few arrive intact.
As a battleground for love, the Atlantic
is too enormous and too romantic-sounding
for the bad language. Daggers rust,
fall useless into the sea.

Take the words: I love you.
Disembodied, though tantalising,
they arrive at your hearing.
Anybody might have sent them
to the wrong address.
Or: I ache for you.
The ache has journeyed long distances,
is tired with itself.
How does one ache for a you?
What is a you and where?
Take these words: You do not understand.

Print them and post them back.
We are just our words.

This is written in a faintly Eliotian manner, namely tongue in your cheek. You state one thing – and very clearly, too – and your heart is actually in its opposite. You mistrust clarity, in short, but you use it everywhere. Nothing of what you write is obscure (there are tons of fertile poetic ambiguity, though), so communication with the reader is certain. Your dancer's movements have turned into words. They are obvious, but only become meaningful to the reader who is a soul mate. You fervently want your reader to share your being, to partake of your dancing words as a holy communion. Is all this true or am I misreading your poems?

**ES**. This poem, and others in that book, have that learned nationalism of the displaced person which I described earlier, and that learned nationalism breeds its own language which is then used for all transactions – including the romantic ones. In this case, any nuances or complexity have been reduced to a graph to be analysed. When it comes to detachment, geographical distance is the least of the problem. All we need to do is open our mouths.

I don't like talking about my poems too much though. I'd rather talk about experiences or people or politics or gossip about love affairs (or have them!). I prefer to leave the interpretation to the reader. But I can identify with the notion of holy communion, since I've always seen my engagement with literature as a religious one. The act of writing to me is the closest I think I get to or experiencing a kind of epiphany. In literature, I find a belief system of sorts, the only kind I can adhere to.

**LV**. A poem (*Physics*) mentions emigration, Ellis Island. Is there a family story behind that which you could reveal?

**ES**. As with a huge percentage of the US population, my family came through Ellis Island, which was, surprisingly, derelict for many years, before being transformed into an excellent museum. (Actually, not so surprising it was derelict. The Americans are cavalier with their heritage. They appreciate it in England, where everything is *supposed* to be old. But in the US everything's supposed to be *new*.) So it took ages for NYC to get around to commemorating that site's importance not just to NYC, but also to all of America. The first time I went there was a couple of years after my father's father had died. Samuel Salzman was born in Poland, and came to the USA around 1907. Samuel's father had sent over his pregnant wife, my great-grandmother, with my grandfather and his brother, but the father could only come later himself. I'm not sure why. Something to do with my great-grandfather getting drafted or not drafted into the army (you were exempt if you had three children and, so far, there were only two, with another on the way) or something to do with Cossacks and the part of Poland that was Russia. My grandfather remembered these Cossacks. There was something about them putting a candle in the window, to signal something – Cossacks around or friendliness to them. I'm not sure. Eventually, the great-grandfather joined his family in the USA and expanded it to seven children. One of my grandfather's brothers is the well-known psychiatrist Leon Salzman. All the siblings worked and saved money to send Uncle Leo to medical school in Edinburgh. That's how it was done. I wish I knew more. It's all lost now! The history goes so quickly, and age and distance make me regret what I don't know.

My grandfather himself was an extraordinary man: one Bar Exam short of being a lawyer, he taught for many years, but also held an engineering degree and eventually became a psychologist. He was a secular humanist and polymath par excellence. My family of that generation were all secular, but apparently they were all Rabbis before that – Levis or Cohens, I've forgotten which – and anyway it doesn't matter because I'm a woman and so the Rabbi mantle wouldn't pass to me in any case! Still, it's another thing I'd like to know about.

Another of my grandfather's brothers and his wife, in true 1920'/30's intelligentsia fashion, subscribed to Soviet Life until they died. We all lived within a few blocks of each other in Brooklyn Heights. My grandparents were like second parents, I was so close to them. I have this grandmother's name, Frances, as my middle name.

My grandfather had tutored my grandmother through high school and then married her – that old story. I bet they were really passionate. I could feel the ghost of that. My grandmother was born in the US, as a Klenett (originally Klenetsky), raised in Williamsburgh, Brooklyn, which is just over the bridge from the lower East Side. She was a teacher and also ran a children's theatre, and wrote music-theatre – both the music and libretti. Sometimes, my mother, referring to this dancing daughter, would say: 'I don't know where she gets it from' and my grandmother would look at her like she was crazy.

Later, my grandmother ran a book business from her home, but that was just an excuse for accumulating something like 20,000 books in her home. Subsequently, my grandfather also tutored me through Stuyvesant High School – a math and science high school where I had the Irish writer Frank McCourt as my teacher. (He may be partly responsible for my Irish honorable status.) Subsequently, I also ran a book business in England, to help support my writing habit. I carried across the ocean what books I could manage – not enough of, never enough, but enough to make a nice collection I'm really proud of.

My grandmother on my mother's side, Beatrice, was born in Hungary and probably also passed through Ellis Island, although she never spoke about it. (My twin sister has Beatrice for her middle name.) This grandmother was raised in the mid-west, so I've got some Great Plains Americana in me too. That branch of the family included the actor Edward G. Robinson and the name of Martinson, who started a famous coffee company. Also, there were Pasternaks – apparently related to the well-known film producer of that name. Nice, but I'm more interested in having Boris on my side!

The early photos of this part of my family reveal some dark-skinned relatives, who look pretty Gypsy-like to me! It was also this part of my family who got caught in the camps. A couple of them seemed to have gotten out before the end of the war – perhaps as part of a group of Hungarian Jews who'd been 'bought' out somehow. One cousin, who had been at Auschwitz, apparently died within weeks of reaching the States – in a diving accident. Beatrice's husband, Sydney, was called Jackson – changed from Kaufmann. His background was Latvian, although he was born in the US, raised in Boston. More I wish I knew!

**LV**. Your love is beautiful and fulfilling, both physical and inner. In *Pilgrim* a line ejaculates, 'How I kissed the shore of my shame and wishing!' Your feeling, whatever it is, is incandescent. Do you begin a poem with a feeling or a word in mind?

**ES**. Some poems start with a word or a line, like a song riff. Or a lateral connection of some kind. It's different every time. I'd be lying to say that a strong emotion doesn't give rise to a poem, but such emotion is useless if I can't find the key which opens the door to a more universal context. If I can't identify the larger picture, then I won't feel driven to write about it.

In this poem, I wanted to dispose of a group of young people, in the most beautiful way possible, as described in the next line: 'And Eternity rushed to meet them in a wave.' Their memorial is the lasting bitterness and longing with which I think of them, but also it is the deep, blue sea. I've given them a beautiful lasting place of rest, you see!

**LV**. *Spells* bestows 'A blessing on the Lyric muse when she is kind to me.' Is she ever different? What do you do when the muse turns her back and walks away? Turn to dance or try other arts? Your husband illustrated wonderfully your third volume. Do you paint, too? Would you like to, if you do not?

**ES**. I used to draw – the last time being when I was very ill with pleurisy. I was living in a small worker's cottage attached to an estate owned by the actress Susannah York. I draw like I play the piano: pretty badly. (The piano playing is marginally less bad, but in another life – see later question – I'll remedy my disgraceful fingering…) I hated being forced to practise by my composer father and my music-loving environmentalist mother. It was only when the lessons stopped, at about age 12 or 13, that I suddenly thought, hmmmm, maybe this wasn't after all such a bad thing to know how to do… So I kept playing, but then didn't have a piano for many years in the UK. An ex-boyfriend finally bought me one, insisting it was a crime that I didn't play anymore. (Speaking of crimes, he eventually got arrested… he was Irish-Catholic by the way.)

Writers are inventive when it comes to procrastination, and many of these procrastinating activities – laundry, dishes – make it impossible to return to any writing afterwards. Which is the point of doing them! Playing the piano *pauses* creative activity but somehow doesn't break the flow in the same way. I've loved submerging myself again into playing the piano; maybe this has been one of the things that led me into writing libretti and lyrics – my father's territory. Some of these lyrics in the recently published booklet of mine, illustrated by my husband, which you mention Since I also did some acting, this writing for music feels very natural, since it unifies these disparate elements of my life. As for the muse, s/he makes brief visits, but then it's all hard graft for craft after that!

**LV**. A poem states, 'With him I felt sublimely wordless. Until this.' You end your poem in this way, and 'this' is the page, actually. Is it not sublime to write poetry? Is silence above that? The silence of eloquent dance? The music of the unuttered, unexplained in so many words?

**ES**. In that poem I wanted to write accurately, yet not explicitly or evasively, about the sexual experience – adequately conveying it from the male as well as female perspective. That is: I wanted to be explicit in a deeper way than just describing the activity. Finding the metaphors was only part of it. Language often unpicks this experience, I find, so I wanted to be explicit in a new way. I wanted to convey the spirituality without prettifying it. To talk about the power-games in love as sex and sex as love is not to diminish the intensity or the meaning of the experience. But to intellectualise the rawness is not accurate either. Within a sequence about the muses, where the muse is male, I also wanted to play with ideas of gender and role-playing – sometimes yielding to the irresistible pun or two! In this poem, that's – appropriately – made explicit. I mean, who's the muse in that poem? This muse turns the tables.

**LV**. 'Why should I be in love with such dazzling sadness', a line rebels. You are sad. I daresay that is the sadness of your very old race. You write about Jesus in your new volume. Do you ever feel your old roots? What is your religion and has it meant anything to you, poetically and in real life?

**ES**. I've talked about my secular heritage. The last year I lived in NYC, I worked as the Fitness Director at an Orthodox Jewish Diet Centre (I kid you not); this was in Borough Park Brooklyn and in Williamsburgh, where my grandmother lived. I guess I learned more about Jewish-ness doing this job. I could feel that pull of belonging, the pleasure that comes from being part of a club, in the same way I feel alien and *not* part of any British club. I was interested – and sometimes appalled – by the Orthodox society, but no more intrigued than I've been about, say, Catholicism, as in the 'Jesus' poem you mention.

Sometimes, when I took a taxi back from there, I'd have Russian or Israeli taxi drivers. One asked if I'd ever visited my 'homeland': Israel. I replied: But *this* is my homeland! I couldn't understand that feeling. Yet I'm living in a country which is noticeably more on the 'side' of the Palestinians, the way that Americans are more on the 'side' of Israel. I know I strongly support the creation of a Palestinian state and deplore the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, yet when I see signs, which I often do, which read *Free Palestine*, I wonder what that means. Does that mean that one would oppose the existence of the only Jewish state which exists anywhere? Does that mean Israel, as a state, shouldn't exist at all? Does that mean push all the Jews into the sea? Does that mean, have them all live in a Muslim state and they'll be okay? How can one support a Palestinian state and not an Israeli state? Zionism has become a dirty word, but it seems to be as dirty as the implications of any state built on religious foundations, instead of those of secular democracy.

Nevertheless, if I feel nationalism of any kind, I feel the nationalism of being a New Yorker. Getting older, living so far from home and not having children, one *does* think more about one's roots, but these are in Eastern Europe. I do often feel like I have no past and no future either. (This subject is also in that 'Jesus' poem.) I guess if I were to become religious I'd have to be a (bad) Buddhist or a (slightly better) Quaker.

**LV**. *Döppelganger* sees your life in these terms:

Nine months before drawing a single breath
I was living with my own death.

This is so unlike your verse in many ways. You celebrate life. Rhyme is discreet, usually. It is noisily present here, just as it was in Eliot's poetry when he meant to ridicule his fears. Is Eliot a model? Do you feel his poems close to your own emotional intensity?

**ES**. God, maybe he is! Who the hell knows? I've been likened to Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, even Marianne Moore and Emily Dickinson. If you're a woman, mostly you get dolled up in dresses, but I'm not sure that Auden, Frost and Larkin aren't lurking in there too. Some more contemporary writers – my peers and friends. They're all there – this invisible crowd, jostling, and mostly not permitted to speak because *I'm* speaking instead. But I'm also listening as they whisper in my ear. I think I can't say that Eliot is a model, any more than other poets except that I do ridicule that which is strongest in me, that's true.

I recognize the fact that I've been wresting myself away from the Irony generation. It's a voice that's seductive, and limiting. Much of my work is actually lyrical, and in many ways I consider myself a nature poet, even though I can't think of a critic who has ever commented on this. It's that pigeonholing stuff. It's been decided in advance who you are and what you write, and why. Urban girl, urban poet, urban concerns. Satire. That's only a small part of the work. I feel that death is always sniffing around under the door while on the other side I take refuge in whatever life-affirming writing I can manage. This is the spiritual, religious aspect to it.

The lyrics I've been writing do contain rhymes which are less discreet. The poem you mention is part of a series on twins; I'm a twin myself. Maybe this subject doesn't lend itself to subtlety….

**LV**. What contemporary poets do you feel akin to? Do you belong to any poetical group?

**ES**. I guess I'm loosely part of the post-formalist crew, although by now I must be 'pre-' rather than 'post-', or smack-in-the-middle-of. Anyway, back to the nationalism: I don't wave any banners. Right now, there's a crew running around who call themselves Language Poets. Hey? Have I missed something here?! Language, eh? There's a novel idea.

Groups or ‘schools’ of writing do emerge naturally, due to the writers sharing the same concerns or just hanging out and getting drunk together. I approve of that. Other groupings happen in retrospect, but I deeply dislike artificially created schools of thought, since they’re often the invention of academia, or writers who’d prefer to do away with some of their colleagues or those famous poets whose reputations they consider to be inflated. But hey, who are they to know? Often, these people are more critics – publishing reviews for years and then one thinks: hey, when’s *your* book coming out, buddy? It’s amusing I guess to play arbiter and invent an academic raison d’etre by creating the one ‘true’ canon – done and dusted before anybody’s dead. Dream on, I think.

There are numerous contemporary poets who move and/or interest me, and I find myself being drawn back to American poets. The UK poetry scene is so small and insular and in recent years it’s been cursed by a smaller and smaller bank of publishers who are usually writers scratching each other’s back. Recently, one American poet resigned as judge because it was alleged, unfairly, in this case, that the same guys (and it’s still mainly guys) were putting each other forward, revolving-door style. *Private Eye* did a funny piece on it. The implication was that there’s been some kind of conspiracy, which I don’t quite believe in…but the end result is the same, and is indeed how it’s portrayed.

I think the pendulum may be swinging back, but the recent flavour of the month is Celtic/Northern Hard Guys – with nods to a few mainly unthreatening and unrisky women writers, who, for the most part, have been very strategic with their work choices – not to mention their private lives. There’s also this big protest among women writers that, hey, we write like writers, not like women, which is true enough, but I think some women writers are deliberately and strategically adopting a style (I never understood this cold-blooded quest for style…) which is masculine. They’re reacting against the sort of male reviewer who may find us ‘enjoyable’ or ‘promising’, but saves his heavyweight adjectives of depth and profundity for the guys. Women who write about love and family are ‘domestic’, while men are writing about the ‘big subjects’.

Anyway, not only are the editors starting to publish their own clones, they *are* more blatantly indulging in cronyish. The only female editor in town, Jacqueline Simms, is now gone from Oxford University Press – who treated her disgracefully – and the world has once again returned to the new-boy network situation. It’s not agenda or anything; it’s just, well, life. Even worse, as with other forms of literature, the critics have landed on the idea of concentrating on the young and beautiful. Oh well, I think not just about the young and beautiful subjects, but also their salivating reviewers: You’ll all get old too!

**LV**. I have not explained what I mean by Desperado. It is a word that ought to describe the starving need of all recent poets – actually all poets after Eliot – to be different from every other writer, to take the law in their own hands and find a way for themselves by force. A literary Desperado is not unlike the hero of Westerners, who lives by killing whoever opposes his will. Your poems show an indomitable will to be. Not to be new, not shocking, not musical. Just to be. I guess you have this subtle sense of poise from dance. Is that too far-fetched? Do you write as you dance?

**ES**. I think writers and editors in the UK take very few risks – with their reviews, with their own writing, with any literary project. British writers are afraid of being sentimental. I used to admire their resistance to sentimentality, but this tendency throws out the baby with the proverbial bathwater. I miss the visionary sometimes. I've found myself more and more admiring those who risk, even if they fail miserably. There are too many writers who don't plough their own furrow. I think you pay a heavy price in this country for being daring. The establishment jealously guards a certain element of its own mediocrity.

**LV**. What do you think of poetry that ignores clarity and encodes meaning in masterful rhymes and rhythms, which, however, fail to reach the reader's understanding?

**ES**. Some writers value a certain kind of obscurity which they'd like others to understand as complexity. This is not to say that some writers, and some poems, aren't more difficult than others. With the so-called return to form, writers may be in danger of getting too enamoured with these newly discovered toys – may be in danger of writing fill-in-the-dots sort of work. Cleverness has become the new altar on which we may sacrifice the humanist poem.

**LV**. Is poetry still a national thing? Are literary borders still operational?

**ES**. I still consider it my duty to bridge the US/UK divide, and then try to ignore it.

**LV**. If you could choose who you could be, what would you choose? Would you choose poetry over dance or would you try something new?

**ES**. Lawyer, sailor, shrink, dancer, traveller. Don't you wish we could institute some kind of swapping lives arrangement, to be able to cover the gamut in a lifetime? Mind you, the writer is one of the few who gets to be everything at once – everything or nothing. I'm sort of glad I have no choice. It relieves me of a great burden, makes it easier. I wouldn't be able to choose.

**LV**. This invasion of the computer screen can make or unmake poetry. Which do you think it does?

**ES**. I actually think that the computer (and e-mail) may revive the art of letter writing!
X-cept I hate that shorthand stuff FYI. But sometimes the pithy abbreviations can have an art to them. The computer is a godsend for the prose-writer.

**LV**. Do you write by hand or type your poems straight into the computer? Eliot used to type. Many poets, though, prefer the feel of pen and paper. The act of handwriting stimulates their imagination. What stimulates yours?

**ES**. I fervently believe that poetry must be written longhand and kept in that form until quite a late draft. Writing with a pen and paper is a physical experience, which is sensuous. The sensual and sensuous qualities of the words travel up through the pen, not through the computer. Experiencing the physicality of language is what form is about.

**LV.** Do you belong to American or British poetry?

**ES**. That's one of those questions which others can answer. I'd prefer not to. Often enough, I've heard editors or writers comment about writing in an 'American' way, but they never really explain what they mean. Another handy pigeonholing I suspect. They don't want to explain it. Probably they can't. Maybe one of the hallmarks in my work is a mid-Atlantic suspension. Or Nowheresville.

**LV**. Could you think of a question that you would most like to be asked?

**ES**. How about: *Would it be all right if I gave you a whole heap of money, to last the rest of your life, so you wouldn't have to worry about the subject ever again?* (Answer: *okay*.)

January 28, 2003

## **Fiona Sampson, *I'm aware that my writing doesn't belong to any particular school. But this is involuntary.***

Interview with **FIONA SAMPSON** (born 1963), British poet and editor

**LIDIA VIANU:** You are the editor of a singular literary review in London, entitled *Orient Express*, in memory of a pre-war Europe, almost nostalgically. As you say in its preface, 'The lingua franca of Europe after communism, the new Latin, is English.' I say singular because you publish Eastern European writers at a time when they are no longer the latest fashion. You publish them for their literary, not political value. Besides your PhD in the philosophy of language, you are also an expert on the literature of post-communist Europe. How have you become one? Why? Why this review?

**FIONA SAMPSON:** I can't explain exactly why Central Europe feels like my cultural centre of gravity. I know it has something to do with my first life, as a violinist. Up until my mid-twenties I worked as a soloist and chamber musician – in fact I studied briefly in Salzburg – and part of my total immersion in that world – an immersion that was necessarily physical, emotional, mental – was an understanding that the cultural heart of Europe was somewhere between Vienna and Budapest. A long way from Bucharest: but equally far from Paris. As from London.

To be a violinist was to be in a kind of condition of cultural displacement – not exile, that would be too strong a term – and to have, probably even to enact, a sense of meaning's originating elsewhere. But that, in the end, is what being a performer is like. The meaning is always elsewhere, and you turn towards it. I wanted to be a meaning-maker. That sounds hubristic, but I meant it in quite a local way! I wanted to make my own meaning. Which is probably why later, in my research, I found philosophies of language which allowed me to think of language use, of poetry-making, as making a way through the world.

All the same, if I've managed to work round to my own ways of thinking and working since the time when I was a violinist, I might have been expected to lose this somewhat blind, migratory sense of the significance of Central European culture. But: I recently met the Austrian painter Johann Julian Taupé and was struck by the way he used 'serious' to mean 'important, valuable'. That attitude – that orientation towards what's difficult, what's more than cultural surface – probably encapsulates Central European culture and thought for me.

I started working with writers from this region when I ran an international poetry festival in Wales, 1995-9. And then later when I was Director of a trust with a big literary translation programme (1999-2001). I began to be invited to

the countries we worked with; and like many before me I was simply seduced by South-Eastern Europe. Why? A hundred years ago it might have been Italy; sixty years ago, Spain. I am, after all, a Northerner: and I grew up in Wales, that small rainy country facing away from Europe across the Atlantic. I think we tend, we Northerners – if we have any sense of the solipsistic dangers of staying home – to experience those countries of the South, where a sophisticated, old culture is nevertheless open to the sunlight, as something like stepping out of Plato’s Cave. Culturally, much is the same (though much is different too) but we see everything, including our own work, differently. Perhaps more clearly?

Orient Express itself was first thought up at a British Council conference in Constanta in Autumn 2000. Key co-conspirators were the poet Denisa Comanescu, translators Irena and Elena Radu; and, from Serbia, Rasa Sekulovic. None of whom wanted the continuing work of being Editor. Then there was the long haul to get funding, which is why the magazine took two years to be launched. But: you’re right to say that my own interest is in literary rather than political value. I am a writer, not a politician: and think that ‘reading’ texts as literary writing is a basic form of respect for often-extremely distinguished colleagues from the countries OE covers. Countries whose literary culture enthuses me. And something else: though there are many aspects of recent European history one would be a fool or worse not to condemn, there are many other aspects of recent social and political experience – including revolution and war – on which I strongly believe no-one who has not experienced them should legislate. This too is a kind of respect.

**LV.** Your lines are both clear and loaded with ambiguity, as good poetry should be. But clarity is a sign of your respect for the reader. I take this respect for the reader’s understanding to be a major sign of Desperado literature. Writers have got tired of Eliotian or Joycean encodings. They want their audience back, and now they have it. Is this a reason why you write with such apparent simplicity (even though you hide unbelievably sophisticated emotion)?

**FS.** Well, this is a difficult question to answer because you already have! I’m very glad you mention this – perhaps – tension between emotion and ‘straight’ surface. Again, there must be something about music here. I find I need a poem – whether in free or formal verse – to shift into completion in a way which always has something to do with rhythm. Sometimes I resist this. The ‘dying fall’ of tunefulness could be a seduction, a falling-short of what a poem might otherwise have come to. And yet: I do and always have read for voice, for texture. This applies to novels too. Probably comes from my school years, when I read my way round the Municipal Library, guided by only a rudimentary sense of ‘having heard of’ some authors. I had to make my own mind up about what I read: and had a strong sense that some books were hard to read – sticky, gloppy – because they were badly written. Whereas the ‘Real Thing’ – whatever its diction, and I do include the Modernists in this – had a kind of directness. Maybe charisma. Maybe mastery. Something, anyway, to do with unchallengeability. So of course I aspire to that. And, also because of that history of autodidacticism, I do believe in The Reader – not just The Ideal Reader – their responsiveness, their intelligence and their significance.

**LV.** Some Desperadoes resort to autobiography in their poems, others reject it firmly. In fiction it is just the same. This is an ancient issue, but it is somewhat more obvious now: most Desperadoes are unashamed of their lives and make that the web of their literature. You are one of those – within limits – and I just wonder what you feel about those writers who claim they prefer masks, imagination, trips into other lives, anything but self-revelation?

**FS.** Which brings me on to this question. Yes, again I agree with your analysis of what I'm doing. I have a horror of the Ivory Tower. I quite violently dislike poetry which seems to me to be playing by itself or to itself. Poems about conceits – chemistry can be a metaphor! feminism comes to the farmyard! – whether narrative or not. – And then? I want to ask. Surely we should use chemistry/the farmyard as a metaphor on the way to something? It's the same with the play of masks/roles/post-modernities. These things can surely be rich – I note how much I'm enjoying characterization in the verse-novel – but not as topical ends in themselves.

In fact I struggle to repress the idea of immorality! It's not only that, if we want there to be a place for the poet in society, we have to take (on) that place. It's that, I'm afraid I feel, people in every society deserve to have a poetry. This is partly the result of my earning my living, for years, pioneering the use of writing in health and social care. Creative writing and reading: including with people with no literacy, people with profound learning difficulties, people with mental health problems. Who have no difficulty responding to the most challenging, the most profound poetry; and who want to read and write it.

…Of course this isn't the same as being populist!

**LV.** A poem like *Hotel Boulevard* betrays your having seen Romania. You publish Romanian poets in your review. How did you come to know Bucharest, what do you think of Romanian literature?

**FS.** … Though one British reviewer thought it was a poem set in a Spanish resort. Hurrah for close reading!

Yes, as you guessed I do like Bucharest a great deal. The nineteenth century residential districts: the squares and odd junctions where children play and there are trees; the smell of linden everywhere in the centre; the way everything is displayed on the pavement – the girls strolling (with that kind of arrogance), the stray dogs, the kiosks – as if everything is lived out there. The churches. Magda Carneci told me once that the reason Orthodox churches are so small and dark – womblike – is that they reflect the Orthodox God, who is already there, loving and protective whatever the faithful do: unlike the gothic Catholic God, who must be moved by prayer, supplication. I like the sense of protection Orthodox churches give me.

But I've only been twice (so far). Once when I was scouting for writers for the literary trust I mentioned, in the summer of 2000; once en route to a British Council conference in Constanta that autumn. On that occasion I spent a

little time in the city and read at the Literature Museum with Ioana Ieronim and Saviana Stanescu.

Romanian literature: a big topic! I haven’t found my way into the fiction so much: I’m not so enthused, as we’ve already discussed, by the more mannered post-modernisms. Certainly not where it becomes a cliché. But the poetry! You have so many extraordinary poets at the moment. I think first of all of the women: Ana Blandiana, though I confess I prefer her on the page, where I can give her poems my own mental voice; Liliana Ursu; Denisa Comanescu who’s not, I think, writing so much at the moment – I suspect her of modesty; Grete Tartler; Mariana Marin; Nina Cassian; Ioana Ieronim – I love her *Triumph of the Water Witch* for its intensity and movement allied with concrete detail; the hugely prolific and charismatic Magda Carneci; Herta Muller who’s now in Berlin; Diana Manole who’s now in Toronto. And then Mircea Cartarescu, Liviu Stoiciu, Augustin Pop… it’s hard to know where to stop. Impossible to generalize: but there’s an energy and richness in all this work which is absolutely engaging. I mean, too, that what might be free-floating surrealism on the one hand or scenes from daily life on the other seem to be anchored – to each other? – so that instead there’s a metaphorical, transformative range which is absolutely rigorous and worked for.

**LV**. Love is a grave mood with you. The poignancy is veiled by meditation, and you place a certain distance between yourself and pain, between your lines and the reader’s sympathy. Desperado writers – poets and novelists – smash love into particular emotions, migrate from lyricism to memory. Unlike them, here, you are preeminently lyrical. Whether love or compassion, your lines communicate feeling overtly. Your ambiguity lies in the quality of images, not in the attempt to conceal experience. Is writing a diary to you? A refining of experience into concentrated but mainly accessible words?

**FS.** No, I wouldn’t say writing is like a diary for me. I think the content of my writing has little or no function in my life. Which isn’t to say content’s unimportant to me: just that it belongs to an inner world of reflection. In which lines of thought go along somewhat independent rails from those of experience. Of course, everything that happens feeds one’s writing self. But at the very least, there’s a time-delay before I find I can write about something which has happened to me. But I do find writing itself very calming. Very stabilizing. All the more so because it will be about something other than what’s going on in my life.

But you’re right about how love is with me: also about the distancing. What a burst of gratitude one feels on being read ‘right’ (as I’d claim)! I think the distancing happens because it’s at this moment – of reflection after the fact – in the cycle of an experience that it becomes ‘mine’. Somehow I’m not so interested in poetry which expresses an emotional state. I want to ask – so what? Tell us something we don’t know, show us something in a new light! It seems too easy to write stuff which isn’t mediated, isn’t shaped.

**LV**. How would you describe your ideal reader? What do you expect of him?

**FS.** At various times my ideal reader has been abstract; at others concrete. That's to say, one particular individual I have in mind when I write, and to whom I will actually show the manuscript. The wider question is more interesting, but more difficult (of course!). Maybe it's a little like being asked to imagine a god: some absolutely understanding, intelligent attention which is paid to each word. A being who is by definition right; whom one can trust.

At the moment I have two – let's say mental readers. They're both writers, of course. One, the British poet Tim Liardet, is an old friend. Our poetic enthusiasms are roughly similar, though it's always painful when they diverge: if he doesn't enjoy a poet I like, or if he has a phase of writing only in certain genres, for example. We've read each other's work closely for five or six years now. The other is the Macedonian writer Aleksandar Prokopiev. He can't read me so closely for language; but I would say he is very in tune with the project, the content, of what I write. Certainly, he's my imagined reader for the verse-novel I'm working on now. Needless to say, both are writers whose own work I admire enormously. Both are also individuals I trust: I mean I trust them to be generous, not competitive: and to tell me what doesn't work as well as what does.

**LV.** You have a PhD in philosophy of language. Has that changed your attitude towards words and has it helped you write? Has it made you choose poetry? You are currently writing a novel in verse. Is fiction more appealing than poetry?

**FS.** Poetry made me choose philosophy, rather than the other way round. Though of course that way of thinking – that training, and it really did feel as though my mind was being trained: quite painful and quite unlike the practice of literary criticism I'd come from – informs all the other thinking and writing I do. I started studying English as an undergraduate, but changed to PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics) when I found I wasn't able to explore ideas sufficiently. And yet I'd loved academic literary criticism: it felt exciting, heady, liberated. A paradox, probably one that's central to my way of going on: freedom and adventure on the one hand, the importance of discipline and 'doing it right' on the other.

The ideas I'd wanted to explore had to do with the role of poetry. I wanted to find a way, other than the misty-eyed Leavisite claim, of arguing for poetry, especially the poetries I felt were the 'real thing'. I wanted to think about what language does, how it inflects all our experiences. And what the heightened language – that's to say, thought – of poetry might do. I found some particularly helpful ideas in late Wittgenstein and late Heidegger. Though I still use the tools – and ideas – I acquired or developed in thinking and writing on these topics when I want to address another practice – such as cultural translation – I'd say I don't have the same fierce curiosity I had while studying: because I have found a way to articulate my experiences of language. Which is not to say I believe mine is the only way to do so!

Poetry has always seemed to me like the ‘real thing’: more profound, richer, more permanent than fiction. Which one could think of as weakened by anecdote. Of course that’s not the whole story: in Britain, the novel is seen as the serious literary form, partly because it’s considered to extend outwards from ‘the writer’ (narrator) into fictional character and action. Poetry is seen, even by many cultural critics, as marginal, perhaps narcissistic. This is compounded by the rise in serious critical reception of pop culture. It seems unhealthy to be always marginal in one’s own society: so last year I decided to write a novel, *Night Map*. The novel’s not yet out. But I enjoyed writing it – it seemed easier than writing poetry – and thought I’d like to capitalize on the experience. And I enjoy verse-novels. There are lots of very strong recent examples in English, as I’m sure you’re aware: Seth, Murray, Walcott, Raine, Carson… And I wanted to write in a longer form. If I hadn’t started work on the verse-novel I’m sure I’d be writing sequences. And I wanted to explore migration, distance, communication… All these things came together. But, unlike the novel, *The Distance Between Us* is the most difficult writing I’ve ever done. It requires the concentration of lyric verse, without offering the same chances for epiphanies. Much of the time is spent in redrafting which feels thankless, incremental and not at all poetic while you’re in the middle of it. But control of the whole structure as it emerges is important too…

**LV.** Who are your models, if any, and who are your contemporary friends? Desperado writers usually reject grouping. They are each his or her own trend. They are, however, blatantly similar in their dissimilarity. Do you feel you belong to any group or tendency?

**FS.** I’m aware that my writing doesn’t belong to any particular school. But this is involuntary. I’ve often wished it did! And when I started writing, I served myself an apprenticeship of modeling my work on writing I admired. I was influenced by Eliot’s idea that this is how the young poet starts out: half as an intimate reader. And I had a very rapid series of readerly intimacies, each lasting about three months, with a whole range of poets, from Roethke to Bishop, from Eliot to late Hughes. Now I still have occasional ‘reader romances’ when I discover someone new or become besotted by a book, even one I know well already (recently I spent a month in Spain, where I read Neruda’s *One Hundred Sonnets* and a collection of Tsvetaeva’s longer narrative verse, both in parallel text). Poets I return to over and over are Rilke and his inheritor Tranströmer; Milosz; Carver; Bonnefoy; Murray; and a whole group of North American women: Clampitt, Glück, Carson and Graham. Again, it’s hard to stop listing! But I will.

Who are my contemporary poet-friends? Well, in Britain they’re not so many: Tim Liardet (dreamlike, filmic), Douglas Houston (a powerful formalist), George Szirtes, Pauline Stainer (a unique meditative voice), Ewald Osers (poet and very distinguished translator), Michael Hulse (a prodigy in the ‘80’s and also now known as a distinguished editor, currently of Leviathan), the group of us who clustered round the magazine *Thumbscrew*, now defunct. I’m also happy and proud to be part of the rather European group on the website. Sue Stewart, Herbert Lomas. Novelists Patricia

Duncker and Lynne Alexander. Some of these friendships are personal more than poetic. But in Europe my friendships are more clearly based on the work: the Finnish poets and writers Eira Stenberg, Kirsti Simonsuuri (different though they are), Lena and Vaino Kirstina; Estonian Jaan Kaplinski, who latest manuscript in English I co-translated with the author; in Norway the young but very poetic novelist Ingeborg Arvola; the Catalan poets Susana Rafart and Marguerita Ballester (a wonderful tradition: surrealism with the simplest of dictions); Anatoly Kudryavitsky, Muscovite living in Ireland, and Marina Palei, from St Petersburg and living in Rotterdam; Denisa Comanescu, Diana Manole, Ioana Ieronim, Magda Carneci (you know where they're from!); the Hungarian Istvan Csuhai, formerly editor of Jelenkor, and his wife Anna Gacs; poet-essayist Marija Knezevic and translator and editor Rasa Sekulovic from Serbia; and then fiction writers Aleksandar Prokopiev (flamboyant postmodernist from Macedonia), Beverley Farmer (Australia) and Leslee Becker (USA). In the USA I also have an ex-student, from whom I hear only erratically and who hasn't yet published. But who is an extraordinary and dedicated young fiction writer: Karin Bolender. Important to me in analogous ways are a group of academic friends in International Relations departments; and several visual artists. And, at Oxford Brookes, Steven Matthews (a formidable literary critic, and also one of my 'readers' of *The Distance Between Us*) and Rob Pope (well-known in English Studies for his work with critical re-writing; but with an eastern European perspective too) are, although I'm new in the Department, increasingly important allies.

This sounds like a long list (and I've probably left some people out) but I suppose it represents several things: a kind of supportive network; a constituency; people with whom one has so much in common it's almost impossible not to be friends. We don't email all the time – and some are more regular correspondents than others – but we do try to see each other when I'm in the various countries.

**LV**. Your sensibility quivers. You are so easily hurt. And yet your poems are so strong. Do you see yourself as a strong poet? A poet who can transmute personal pain into art and be happy because of it?

**FS.** This is very perceptive too! Yes, I think I am a strong poet: because I try not to let whatever happens compromise the poems, whether or not they're directly about something difficult.

**LV**. Having read *Folding the Real* I realize I know next to nothing about your immediate experience. When were you born, what was your family background, what is your present life? What is your education, what brought you to poetry? Do you flirt with other arts as well?

**FS.** I was born in 1963, in London, and spent much of my childhood on the west coast of Wales, in Aberystwyth. As for education, well, by now you know about that: I left school at sixteen to pursue a career and studies – simultaneously – as a violinist. I didn't go to Oxford till I was twenty-five, by which time I was already working as a writer. And you

know about my career since then. Residencies pioneering writing in health care (all the time I was studying, in fact), and after a while Poetryfest and the development of some expertise in international writing, alongside a research career. I still publish books and go all over the place to lecture on writing in health care. Yet I never saw it as my key identity. And now I have a three-year Research Fellowship at Oxford Brookes University to write my verse novel, though the book will be finished before the Fellowship is. I live with my partner in countryside half an hour's drive from the city of Oxford.

**LV**. Many contemporary poets give readings and one of them said that this was a way of survival for poetry. What do you think: is poetry going through a communication crisis? Is the computer screen going to prove stronger and win the battle? Can't the internet help poetry, bring poets together and become an ally?

**FS.** I suspect that the screen will be an ally. The internet certainly is in my working life: look where my literary friendships are! E-mail is so literary: it's immediate as a phone call (well, not always of course: some of my friends have intermittent access) yet it's textual. You can write your phone call! You can attach drafts of the work you're talking about, as soon as they're finished. No more endless photocopying. E-mail makes a project like editing *Orient Express* possible. And I'm sure people bother to get in touch more because one's accessible: look at you contacting me because I share a website with Ruth Fainlight! And – as I say in answer to question thirteen – I love using a computer and print out to 'iron out' my terrible typing, my hopeless handwriting.

In other words, I think the screen will be a tool for us, not a replacement of us. It's a category error to think one precludes the other, really, isn't it? Poetry and digital information processing just don't do the same things… But all the same I love readings, and I love festivals where one meets lots of other writers. I love the sound of poetry, and I love the way a writer's personality re-inflects their work when they read live. So I hope readings continue for a long time to come!

**LV**. Do you type your poems directly into the computer or do you need the feeling of pen and paper when you write? Eliot used to type. He said it made his lines more 'staccato'. How do you write?

**FS.** I write poetry longhand, into a book with blank (not lined) pages. In fact one of my indulgencies is to buy A5 books of quite heavy white cartridge paper (often sold for artists' use) to write on. And I use ink, not biro. With phases of pencil. Then I redraft on computer, print out, revise with ink on the print-out, go back to the computer, and so on. And so on. But I write prose straight onto computer and then revise in the same way. I'm so glad I missed the age of typewriters! I type quite fast but I don't touch type and I make lots of mistakes. I definitely need the print-out: when there's a page of printed text I find it much easier to read and judge. And I have terrible handwriting, so although I also

seem to need the human process of holding a pen, it’s not much use if I’m writing prose.

Where I write matters to me too, though of course I’ve done it everywhere – on trains, in waiting rooms, in classrooms before students arrive, at the kitchen table. But, if I can choose, I like a table below a window – an open window, ideally. And no-one else in the room. At home I’ve a shed at the bottom of the garden. I’ve painted it blue, and put some books and a table and a heater in it, and the cats and I spend as much time as possible there.

**LV**. How would you characterize British poetry today?

**FS.** I’m afraid I’m not enthused as often by British poetry as I am by reading work in translation, or from the USA. It’s odd that that culture, which is even more globalised and ephemerised than ours in Britain, has managed to preserve some place for the poet as some sort of mandarin presence. I don’t of course mean that I prefer dead, ‘academic’ verse! But it’s a question of the role of the work.

We also seem sometimes to lack continental range. Instead of ambition in our work, there’s largely a kind of defensive miniaturization of concerns and possibilities. One of the great glories of contemporary Britain is its cosmopolitan character: if you get on the Tube anywhere in London, any day, you’ll hear more languages than you can recognize. A Jamaican will be sitting next to a Kurd and opposite might be a Bosnian, a Pakistani or someone from Saudi Arabia. And that’s just the people who live here: leave alone the tourists and business travelers. Yet we have very little sense of this linguistic and cultural scope in our poetry. True, we have some token presences, many of them poets with Afro-Caribbean backgrounds, but nothing like the scope of the novel, which is changing hugely under Indian, African, Chinese and even European influences. So: there are some wonderful poets in Britain today. But there are missed opportunities too.

Poets whose work I like a lot: John Burnside (lyrical, rhythmic, studied); Alice Oswald (Hughes’ inheritor); Menna Elfyn and Gwyneth Lewis from Wales; Michael Donaghy (okay, he’s American); W.N. (Bill) Herbert (prodigious invention); the big boys: Douglas Dunn, Geoffrey Hill and Tony Harrison.

This is of course to say nothing about Ireland, a country whose poetry is too rich and complex for me to even start on here!

**LV**. Is literary criticism any help these days? Do you have any sympathy at all for academic, scholarly criticism? Would you be prepared to agree that if criticism is not literature it should not exist?

**FS.** Hurrah for the sustained attention span of an academic critic. Certainly in the UK there’s a lot of ‘dumbing down’ of literary criticism, not in its diction but in the requirements critics have of poetry. Accessibility is a watch-word. Which seems odd, since it’s so very easy to think of examples of great poems which one hasn’t altogether ‘got’ at first

reading. Critics are often dim about formal devices too. They simply don't notice them, because they simply haven't been trained in prosody. Whereas academic critics have.

There remains some controversy about the approach of theory in British academic criticism. Much of this is typical British pragmatism – also known as empiricism –: never mind the big idea, let's stick to the safe ground of what's in front of us. Of course, the problem with this approach is that the big ideas are there in front of us in and around every text. Still, I'm in favour of criticism which doesn't systematize the work a poem or other primary text is doing: which allows it to live independent of that criticism. I'm in favour, in other words, of some theory in academic criticism: providing it doesn't approach too close.

Oxford, 13 December 2002

## Jo Shapcott, *I like the idea of being 'a desperado of the tender thought'*

Interview with **JO SHAPCOTT** (born 24 March 1953), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** Your poetry conceals your real life. I can only infer you may have been born in 1953, from your poems. Who is Jo Shapcott, when were you born, what have you studied, what is your profession?

**JO SHAPCOTT:** I was born in London in 1953. I studied for my first degree at Trinity College, Dublin. I don't have a profession but first and foremost I write poetry. In addition I do a little teaching and broadcasting.

**LV**. You believe in clarity, I think. Your poems do not hide behind crossword complications, you could not care less about rhyme, although the rhythm of your poems is a mesmerizing sway of sea waves, not obvious at first sight, but insidiously overwhelming. Spoken idioms do not interfere with your lines. You hold your poems in deep and tender respect. What comes first to you as a poet, mood or idea?

**JS.** I do believe in clarity. And actually I could not care more about rhyme. The music of the poems I write is all important to me. I rarely use full rhyme, you'd be right there. For the here and now, it's too unwieldy an instrument, and – to me anyway – can sound clunky – as if a contemporary composer were bound at all times to the musical arc suggested by a perfect cadence. Of course, there are plenty of contemporary poems I admire which disprove this wild generalization, but still, that's my particular ear. My most recent book, *Tender Taxes*, is full of other kinds of rhyme – I love the more subtle music offered by playing with vowels and consonants. Paul Muldoon is the poet I admire most for this kind of rhyme. Your description of my rhythmical world of the poems is quite beautiful although I'd add that many of them move from and return to iambic pentameter. I don't know which comes first, mood or idea, and worry that if I tried to analyze the interchange too deeply everything would collapse.

**LV**. You use masks defiantly (Elizabeth and Robert, Tom and Jerry, Mad Cow, and last but not least, Rilke's translator), as if you were saying, This is all about somebody else. You push autobiographical lyricism away. Most Desperado poets do the same, each in his or her own way. Some take refuge in the twists of language, but you write with your soul. The page is full of emotion. Why the masks? Does sensibility need protection? Is poetry dangerous?

**JS.** I hope poetry is dangerous. The fact that poems and poets can still be banned in some parts of the world makes me feel it must be. If it didn't disturb, it wouldn't be working. My concern is to make poems. You are right that I'm not interested in self revelation but I don't see why I should be. I simply don't believe that's what poems are for. Novelists make things up. Playwrights make things up. So do poets. Invention and imagination are central to what we do.

**LV**. You are very much in love with love. Unlike most Desperado novelists, who leave this feeling outside the covers of their books, you cannot do without it, but will not subscribe to it in person, not in *Her Book*, anyway. A lettuce is allowed to describe the bliss of shared feeling. In *Tender Taxes* Rilke is dead enough to be safe as a recipient of love. You love his texts and your own imagination, your own need for love. In the economy of your poetry, what is the use of this deliberate distance from your soul? Is autobiography bad for poetry?

**JS.** I don't know that autobiography is bad for poetry. If you thought that you'd have to dismiss much great work. But I don't believe that autobiography is necessary for poetry any more than it is for novels. Poems can reveal profound truth about emotion and spirit without being literally true. It's the whole beauty of the imagination, surely, that it grants us the freedom to tell our stories by making things up.

**LV**. You write, 'I have seen the crack in the universe/ through which the galaxies stream' (*I'm Contemplated by a Portrait of a Divine*). The poem ends with, 'keeping the drawer shut/ in case my heart should slip out, fly up.' There is a sense of emotional panic in your lines, whose reason is hidden, only to be guessed at. Since we are talking outside your lines now, what is the reason of this universal fear? Is poetry any good at soothing it?

**JS.** Poems are for exploration, discovery, transformation. They would be very dull otherwise. But not necessarily personal discovery – the idea of poetry primarily for therapy is pretty pointless, don't you think?

**LV**. You avoid writing explicitly about love, your being in love. Yet I have found one poem that goes far deeper and is fairly explicit, as far as your poetry goes: *Matter*. I am going to quote it for my readers to feel the depth of your feeling, which is there even when you apparently banish it, push it back stage:

He touched my skin
all afternoon
as though he could feel
the smallest particles
which make me up.

By the time he knew each
of the billions of electrons
which fly through my body
every second.

Then I think he was searching
for the particles
not yet discovered
but believed to exist.

Then I didn't know
what time it was any more
and neither of us knew
which was inside or outside
as he reached somewhere
very deep and fingered gold –
charms, strangers, tops and gravitons –
but not the words he wanted
which only come now.

The poem is an afterthought of the soul. Most Desperado poets delve into sounds rather than emotion. Your interest in the word is mainly emotional, even though devious. I would associate your poetry with Ackroyd's fiction in my demonstration that the Desperado (a way of avoiding postmodernism as a term, an attempt at defining the present in literature) is deeply committed to sensibility if the reader can find the path. What do you expect from this reader? How should he read you, respond to your lines? Emotionally, intellectually, with sympathy or detachment? Is your poetry meant to be relished for its delightful irony or scoured with a hungry soul?

**JS.** I would be very happy for a reader to – as you put it – relish my poems for their delightful irony OR to scour them with a hungry soul OR read them in any other way they wish. It's a matter which is quite outside my control.

**LV**. I cannot detect echoes from other poets in your lines. You use a motto from William Carlos Williams (I think it is *The Last of My Grandmother*), and you lovingly converse with Rilke, eternally young and in love. Who are your masters and those who influenced your poetic voice?

**JS.** Shakespeare, Elizabeth Bishop, Chaucer, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, W.H. Auden, George Herbert, John Donne.

**LV**. You write in *The Mad Cow is a **Vogue** Model*: 'these words, these little deaths, these individual/ devils...' You mention words and address readers directly in other places, too. Your lines conceal your preoccupation with art because they sound so natural and flow so easily into our understanding. Most Desperado poets jot down private meanings in public lines and leave it at that. Your meanings are no less private (even more so, actually), but you fight each word and win: the sentences are crystal clear, which readers are thankful for. Is your poetry on the whole anything like an emotional diary, an attempt at outlining the universe using language? Do you merely want the reader to become aware of infinity when he reads you, or to become aware of you perceiving and conveying it? To share your emotions or just stare at the painting from behind the red cord?

**JS.** I like your idea of poems as an attempt to outline the universe using language. That's a big, ambitious, sexy thought. On the other hand, I would hate to think poems were merely an emotional diary.

Again, my wishes for the reader are irrelevant. It's enough for me to do and be everything I can in the poems.

**LV**. Death is not a favorite topic with you, but I have found one remarkable poem, about death seen as a new life: *When I Died*.

I'm coming back on All Saints' Day
for your olives, old peanuts and dodgy sherry,
dirty dancing. I'll cross-dress at last
pirouette and flash, act pissed.
You'll have to look for me hard:
search for my bones in the crowd.
Or lay a pint and a pie on my grave to tempt me out
and a trail of marigolds back to the flat,
where you'll leave the door ajar
and the cushions plumped in my old armchair.

I could speak about echoes of the metaphysical poets here, if I did not know better. Your poetry has taught me that there is no irreversible and no forever. Is that what you might call your lesson? Or how would you put it into plain words?

**JS.** Transformation is at the centre: it's hard to say more than that. My best plain words are in the poems: I can't put it another way. But I've recently been reading the work of another writer who believes passionately that change is an attribute of the highest order. This is Galileo Galilei, in a brilliant passage from his 'Dialogue Concerning Two Chief World Systems' which, I think, prefigures Darwin:

'I cannot without great astonishment – I might say without great insult to my intelligence – hear it attributed as a prime perfection and nobility of the natural and integral bodies of the universe that they are invariant, immutable, inalterable, etc., while on the other hand it is called a great imperfection to be alterable, generable, mutable, etc. For my part I consider the earth very noble and admirable precisely because of the diverse alterations, changes, generations, etc. that occur in it incessantly. If, not being subject to any changes, it were a vast desert of sand or a mountain of jasper, or if at the time of the flood the waters which covered it had frozen, and it had remained an enormous globe of ice where nothing was ever born or ever altered or changed, I should deem it a useless lump in the universe, devoid of activity and, in a word, superfluous and essentially non-existent. This is exactly the difference between a living animal and a dead one; and I say the same of the moon, of Jupiter, and of all other world globes. '

**LV**. Except London, your fridge, your terrace and your computer with e-mail, I do not catch many images of yourself in the lines, but I can definitely feel your presence precisely because you suppress its physical details and I am free to improvise. You use words to paint impressionistic landscapes of the soul, as you do in *Gilwern Dingle*:

A lane between two meadows,
not leading anywhere
but still managing to tempt
the fields to go along with it.

A track which often has
nothing ahead
except the ford,

and the lengthening season.

This poem is perfect. It creates the essential mood of poetry, which is translation, reenactment, self-discovery and, again last but definitely not least, entreating the reader into sharing the page. You are very good at all these. It must be very obvious by now that I think the world of your poetry. I just wonder what you think of my attempt at forcing you into a group. I must explain that being a Desperado means being different from everybody else first and foremost. They are similar precisely because they differ, they reject all classification. This new age is a very solitary time, more so than ever. We all find refuges within ourselves and furnish them with the minds we relate to. I could easily furnish my refuge with your poems. The point is, do you mean your poetry to do just that?

**JS.** I'm delighted that you think I've written a perfect poem. Of course I can't afford to share your view or I might never write another one. Your idea is an interesting one: the reader (and writer) kitting out her shelter with a variety of texts, defense against – what? – the storm? the world? the other? But the exact place where the self and the other touch, where there's the possibility of either transformation or stasis – the place like the cell wall, the chemical chamber of the mitochondria – that's the place that interests me most. And, of course, the catalysts for this opening (or, in their absence, closing) are love of God or poetry.

**LV**. You describe *Tender Taxes* as 'primarily a reader's book'. You create a new Rilke, one who shares your emotions. It is the first time you become intimate, so very intimate with one of your masks. Maybe because Rilke is far more than a persona. He is you. You wonder: 'Am I almost, but not quite, a word?' I have the distinct impression that with this volume you have stated what you want your own poetry to be: sharing recreation. Each reader ought to continue the line and the whole world will turn into windows opening into other windows forever. This stresses emotion. I think I could call you the Desperado of the tender thought. Would you agree that tenderness is the key note of everything you write?

**JS.** I like the idea of being 'a Desperado of the tender thought': me riding into Deadwood on my brown horse, in my cowboy hat, waving my six shooter around, all the townsfolk diving for cover, terrified I might give them a big kiss or a cuddle. Yo.

November 2002

## Eugen Simion, *The critic can be a desperado too*

Interview with **EUGEN SIMION** (25 May 1933), Romanian critic, President of the Romanian Academy

**LIDIA VIANU**: Literary criticism has become more technical and specialized. What do you think of its present language, which no longer quotes ideas at times, but a great critic's terms, which are used like figures in mathematics by other critics? How do you appreciate this new, busy criticism which dislocates language and forbids students – forbids even critics, if they are too weak to object – to think of themselves as creative?
You were saying two decades ago that criticism was creation. Is this still your opinion?

**EUGEN SIMION**: Criticism operates with a large number of concepts and creates new ones (*new criticism* and *newer new criticism* have been very productive), but the mechanical language you are talking about is ridiculous. It implies an unbearable theoretical ignorance. Structuralism and post-structuralism have been reduced to a senseless terminology. The first person to realize semiotics was becoming a kind of 'local imperialism', of academic jargon, with limited circulation, was the very creator of semiotics, Roland Barthes. After *The Pleasures of the Text* he changed his view on language. *Fragments from a Discourse in Love* is a splendid book, totally readable, with a narrative of its own (a narrative of ideas, of course). I could even call it a sentimental novel about the patterns (fantasies) of the sentimental fictional discourse... Who reads today Jean Ricardou, the man who terrified academic conferences in the '70s?.. Jean Starobinsky, from the Geneva critical school, was another great critic after Roland Barthes, who realized we could not change criticism into a code of what it had just decoded (the work). In the early '70s he wrote a wonderful book (*The Critical Relationship*) in which he offered a new critical synthesis, on the basis of new methods for analysis and of a return to creation. He was right. This was the direction literary criticism followed. The exiled author was brought back into the critical text. 'The return of the author', a phenomenon I foretold in a book of essays in 1980, is today unanimously accepted. The proof, among others, is the biographical interest (diaries, biographical essays, memoirs, biographies as such) in Western criticism.

I am today, as I was before, all for a complex, creative criticism, *readable*, with a narrative vein (to help understanding, even to seduce the reader), a literary criticism which has come to know the new methods and has recuperated its old authority and broad mindedness. By 'broadmindedness' I mean the ability of criticism to view the work at all levels. And, besides, I do not think a literary critic must be absent from his own text. Not that he can, anyway...

**LV**. While trying to teach my students thematic criticism as a good beginning for someone apprenticed to writing and interpretation, I was told I was not a pro. How do you react when faced with the intransigence of all those who turn the critical jargon into an indispensable foreign language, without which – not good, right now, politically speaking – we will join neither Europe nor NATO?

**ES**. I leave them alone. You must beware of the one-method man and the man who has only read one book. He is obstinate, intractable, allergic to dialogue. Genuine criticism is a dialogue: with the work, with others, with your predecessors, with the author of the book, who may have wanted one thing and saw the book slowly becoming another, etc. Those who read all books with the same pattern in mind will always end up with one and the same result. They bore me because their analysis does not enrich the work, it makes it poorer... Thematic criticism? A great school of criticism. Of all new methods, this one appealed to me most because it managed to get where traditional criticism never did: the cellars of the text. It sees what a positivist critic is blind to: the inside, the shades, the details, the objects as such, the obscure choices of the spirit. Jean-Pierre Richard, whom I knew well during my stay in Paris, gave thematic criticism complexity and efficiency. He called his method *plurithematism*. Jean Rousset and, to some extent, Jean Starobinsky went the same way. The latter is also a good stylistics specialist. I remember a study by Richard on the gourmet discourse of 19th century prose writers. Wonderful. I followed his suggestion and wrote about the gourmet discourse in the work of I.L. Caragiale (*the* Romanian playwright). I found out unsuspected truths. Good food and good beer (two basic prerequisites of Caragiale's heroes) combine with politics. In other words, people eat much and drink much, they talk politics a lot in Mitică's imaginary land (well-known hero in Caragiale's work). The political discourse is bad in the absence of hors d'oeuvres (gourmet discourse) and of beer (stimulating drink).

Those who deny such trips into the cellar of the text, to quote Caragiale, are afraid of the opposition (Conu Leonida) and want two pensions... (read grants), they want to eat their cake and have it. In the meantime, criticism goes about its business.

**LV**. You write with elegance, you are an aristocrat of the critical style. I think you have never put down to paper a statement that was not your own. You never fool around with other critics' terms, unless you first explain their meaning in the initial context and in your own. You focus on ideas, not automatic critical language. Is commonsensical criticism outmoded? The criticism of the mind and the feelings? The educated yet understandable criticism? What is the cause of this intelligibility-phobia?

**ES.** I am not sure how much I succeed, but I do try to make myself understood. Even more, to please my readers. The critic has this ambition of being himself, not just a satellite (or not only) of the analysed work. Some examples would be: Maiorescu, Lovinescu, G. Călinescu (Romanian critics). They wrote a good prose of ideas and it can still be read.

Even if their aesthetic verdicts are old-fashioned. This is the critic's stake, first of all. In the late '70s I challenged myself: I decided to write a book about some unpleasant authors, exhausted by the school syllabus, often quoted and hardly ever read with real pleasure: the Văcărescu poets, Conachi, Cârlova, Heliade Rădulescu, etc. They made my adolescence a living hell. *What did Ienăchiţă Văcărescu write?* – the teacher would ask. *Ienăchiţă Văcărescu wrote the testament-poem To My Văcărescu Descendants*, I would answer automatically. *What more did Ienăchiţă write?* – the teacher asked me with sadism. *Well*, I would answer, *he wrote the lines 'Tell me heart of mine/ What pain is thine? All right*, the teacher would go on, *but what about Alecu Văcărescu?..* It was all a mess by now. Was it 'little canary'? I was not at all sure, It could be 'poor life I am in/ It is Hell not Heaven', but, no, that was Nicolae Văcărescu, the Christian spirit of the family. In short, I was ignorant about Alecu... So, many decades later, to get my revenge on these petty noblemen who sighed in poems, I decided to write a book. I told myself I must see if I could write a likable, ironical and readable book about these unbearable authors. I wrote a kind of *Gourmet Discourse*, stimulated by Barthes, and a kind of Walachian reply to his famous study. Something unexpected came out: not an ironical discourse, but a book of (almost) love, intellectual love, for these first poets who, with the art of loving, invented Romanian poetry. I found so much pleasure in detecting the *parasol* as an erotic object, symbol of great passion... The book was entitled *Poets' Dawn* and was successful. I reconsidered my attitude to the Văcărescu poets, Conachi... I am no longer at a loss when asked what they wrote. I know well what Alecu wrote, he was a fabulous person... He died pen in hand, killed out of jealousy it would seem... He died like a romantic hero, screaming: 'Ah, my Lord, my inkstand is being taken away, have pity on me, save me for God's sake. Ah...' He was killed by Moruzi's men when he was thirty. How could one fail to love Alecu Văcărescu? My Romanian teacher had forgotten (or had no idea) to tell us what had happened to Ienăchiţă Văcărescu's first son. What a pity!..

I do not take pains to write elegantly. I am trying my best to be precise. I have often said this: the beauty of style comes from its precision. I hate the style strangled by concepts, the so-called *specialized* language. The true specialty of criticism is to notice and convey the essence and details of the work. How could one be understood, persuasive and followed if one fails to communicate?.. As far as methods are concerned, any method is good as long as it is not boring. The method has the value of its user.

**LV**. Eliot began his critical essays with the examination of his terms (Valéry, too, advised critics to operate *le nettoyage de la situation verbale*); he explained his words and very often stopped there. He explained the meanings of a word until he was certain he had mastered it, he never took anything for granted. The verbal reticence of his approach made his criticism creative. How do you view the post-isms of all kinds? Are they right? Have you ever tried to be a mimetic critic?

**ES**. Eliot is very rigorous when he writes, just like Valéry, who is a fanatic of precision. Valéry's *Notebooks* are so close to what I think. He is undoubtedly a great theoretician/ aesthetician of 20$^{th}$ century literature... I am curious to see the new, post-structuralist methods, but I think the time of theory (and methods) in literary criticism is gone. In the '70s you either had a method or had nothing, as far as literary criticism was concerned. Either you were a theoretician or nobody paid any attention. The demon of theory is tired today. Terrorism in literary criticism and theory is also gone. Only academics, professors and their assistants, obstinately support the 'small local imperialisms'. Towards the end of his life, Barthes headed for philosophy. Our contemporaries still count syllables and draw the pipes of a poem, without any curiosity at all for the intellectual blood in it. Literary criticism is in crisis. Here its institution is almost abolished. We shall have to reinvent it, to the welfare of literature, which will otherwise lose its standards.

**LV**. Criticism no longer has in Romania the status it had under communism, when Eugen Simion's column in *Literary Romania* was breathlessly expected, because it could make or mar the destiny of a book, of an author. The same as we have today a Desperado literature, which, after the stream of consciousness (the denial of two thousand years of literary conventions), is a denial of another denial, a desperate alchemy of devices and all kinds of conventions of all times, we ought to be able to talk about a Desperado criticism, another approach to these works which are unlike whatever came before, and also unlike other works by the very same writer. What is the position of criticism at this particular moment, faced with a formless, contradictory and – unfortunately – elitist literature?

**ES**. I have partly answered this question. Yes, for forty years I wrote week in, week out. Too much. I am sometimes sick of literature, of reviews. But this is soon forgotten. I have focussed on diaries lately, which are a nonfictional kind of literature, unacceptable to literature as literature. My ambition has been to prove that this nonfiction which programmatically rejects all literary conventions becomes, at a certain level of depth in terms of expression, genuine literature. The fiction of the nonfictional. I have read hundreds, thousands of diaries, essays... and I have tried to define a poetics of spontaneity. I have not written reviews. I must have been prompted by our literary life, dominated by pamphlets, aggressivity, angry attacks, merry debunkings, etc. ... Elitism? Nonsense. A society must have an elite (in culture as well), but elitism is the philosophy of a local mayor who thinks he is the best in his village. So what.

Reinstating criticism as an institution is complicated. It is connected to synchronization. We live in the age of internet. Unfortunately, I am still in the age of the ball point pen. I still write pen in hand, on my knees. And read pen in hand. I read slowly and think it over at ease. I have noticed my style has changed in this last decade. The first person in the singular is very much present. This means subjectivity. The literary critic no longer accepts a position in the margin of literature... He wants to be part of the text.

**LV**. In the interviews I have taken so far – British and American novelists and poets – I have learned to be very cautious about the label 'Desperado'. Most of them hate being pigeon-holed. Each writer thinks he is one of a kind and states that his relationship with his reader is all that matters. Critics are out of the picture altogether. These writers inform me that all they want is to amuse the reader, which, frankly speaking, they fail to do, because contemporary literature is anything but fun, despite its desperate recourse to irony. It is a complicated literature, requiring rereadings, hiding under the apparent simplicity of style a huge pride (that of creating the perfect work, containing all the devices ever used in the history of literature). The stream of consciousness was above all a denial of two millennia of literature (chronological causality, 'realism', love interest). I think Desperadoes deny this very denial: they use anything that comes in handy and hope to strike gold by means of this alchemy. Can literary criticism take a stand, guide this literary age, which is neither the first, nor the last, neither new, nor old, which is just another convention, no more?

**ES**. Everything is a convention, even if the writer deliberately, programmatically rejects convention. Is the present age different, complicated, as you say? Maybe. I was hoping postmodernism would be a return to the narrative. It was not, it is not now. It is a
self-referentiality which complicates endlessly. Because of this, the novel has lost its audience. It is an obvious truth. When you step into a French bookshop, you realize the novel does not get all the attention (as it used to), but the literature of information: dictionaries, histories of literature, biographies, classics in selected editions, etc. France has no important prose writer today. On the whole, the myth of the great writer has vanished. Barthes noticed this tendency as far back as the '70s. The great writer was replaced by the theoretician, the professor. Then those myths died too. What is in store? A return of the novel. The condition is that, after the experience of postmodernism, the novel should return to the narrative. I do not mean realism, the 19th century pattern for the narrative, but human condition. I am fervently waiting for a novel which will start with the sentence: On the fifth of May 2003, at five in the afternoon, the marchioness went out... The marchioness is a career woman (she is a specialist in foreign affairs or computers)... The author must tell us whom she will meet and how she will spend her evening... The novel as essay, the meta-novel have been exhausted...

The novelist may ignore criticism, but criticism – reinstated – must not ignore the novel.

**LV**. In your case, literary criticism has a didactic side too. I cannot help thinking of those who supervise diploma or PhD papers. Many academics, also critics or only scholars, require the candidates to use an approach, identify a great critic's terms, know the history of the term, the year it was coined, its changes in subsequent contexts... They require critical jargon, without the candidate's ideas. Complicated language alone – repelling, very often – appeases them. What is your reaction when faced with a book of criticism which is faithful to one approach programmatically, forcing it on a decent text? And the reverse: what do you think of a dissertation which is not unaware of recent scholarly

criticism, but chooses a more personal interpretation, aiming at creating its own language, its own terms? I am asking this because, as I said before, you only use other people's terms after a very careful explanation of the meaning.

**ES**. I would not like to go into that aspect here. I discourage those who come with Rom-English to me. I follow G. Călinescu here: he compelled students or PhD candidates to write papers about mediocre or minor writers, not great writers. An effort of information. Write about Octav Şuluţiu first and then try the fantastic in Mircea Eliade... Some agree, others do not. It is a good, efficient didactic method... If the student is uncommonly intelligent (rare case), I change the strategy... When I see them abusing the concepts, I punish them, I ask them to explain. That is really painful... I do not want to hurt anyone's feelings, but I have noticed that the girls (well, young ladies) are uncommonly eager to use these pirate-concepts, which they find everywhere and use upside down. Sorry to say, it is not a sign of intellectuality. It is like a case of measles that heals...

**LV**. I have noticed that in England criticism has two major directions: academic criticism (scholarly and remarkable) on the one hand (I will not comment on its accessibility or the reader's pleasure when faced with it), and reviewing criticism on the other. Reviewing criticism, which you were talking about thirty years ago, is now a pariah, used by literary reviews and papers as advertisement. I am thinking of the wonderful thematic criticism, refused by so many contemporary academics. Why this hatred of common sense? Are critics and academics fighting a war today? Can the conflict be mediated?

**ES**. This is an old dissociation. Reviewing criticism has almost died. We have today the *service de presse* criticism. And, moreover, TV cultural criticism. That is the main attraction. Academic criticism has lost the prestige it had in the '70s and '80s...

Academics and literary critics need not fight, there is no bone of contention. Both families lost the war long ago. They must use the media and adapt. The destiny of a book is made now by Bernard Pivot (or whoever took his place at *Apostrophe*), not by the reviewer at *Mercure de France*. Times have changed.

Works without themes, characters, narrative, ideas, philosophy, punctuation? That can be. Philippe Solers wrote a novel which was one long sentence from beginning to end, no punctuation, of course! Anything can be. The question is who will publish it and if they do, who will read it. Fifteen or twenty years ago, I had an interesting experience: I was preparing the fourth volume of *Romanian Writers of Today* and, as I wanted to write about a novel Mircea Horia Simionescu published while I was in Paris, I borrowed it from the library of the Department of Philology. I think it was *The General Library*. When I opened it, I realized the pages had never been cut. It had been deposited in the library of philology for over ten years and none of the students had had the curiosity to read it. It cannot have been the author's fault, but the fault of the students who had no desire to read... This is what I can say about reading and the message of

literature... If there is a war on, it is the general war of literature (literary criticism included) against the consumer aggression, which generates lack of education and spiritual laziness.

**LV**. What kind of a critic are you? What is Eugen Simion's lesson?

**ES**. A critic who programmatically places himself at the back of literary avant-garde. My lesson is: be national while facing universality (Maiorescu's words), follow great values, never imagine literature can die, never be sick of life (though life can often be hated), never be sick of literature, wake up every morning hoping today you will begin a masterpiece, put into practice the wisest advice I have ever read: Act as if you lived for ever, pray as if you were to die tomorrow... Good advice, as you can see. Do not ask me if I have taken it, though...

**LV**. What are the fundamental features of contemporary literature? Is Desperado a label you could accept?

**ES**. Literature is of course in a crisis. Has it eve been different?.. It is, in fact, man's moral crisis, transferred to literature. A crisis of understanding, one of image. Man has realized he is no longer what he had learned he was. Humanistic sciences offer various definitions ('man is a sum of complexes', 'man is a sum of social relationships', etc.), but none is sufficient. Great poetry can come out of this despair. Great fiction, too, because man is the only being who can use his failures.

**LV**. What do you expect from a book of criticism? I know you enjoy reading Barthes and Jean-Pierre Richard (thematic critic, to some critics' horror), the same as many others. You are aware of everything that is going on in criticism today. When you open a new book, what is your feeling: one of joy, apprehension, curiosity, need?

**ES**. I expect to read something interesting. No prejudices. I even read my enemies. If they write a good book, we bury the hatchet. If they do not, never mind... What depresses me (see, the critic can be a Desperado too) is bantering and aggressivity. Two contemporary fortes...

**LV**. Do you read literature – at this point of your life – for the pleasure of reading or mainly for the pleasure of writing about it?

**ES**. During the last few years I have read mainly subjective literature. I enjoy reading the classics. I love the 19th century and the former half of the 20th more and more. I have recently written about Eminescu, Creangă, Arghezi, Ion Barbu, Bacovia, Goga... What delight. What joy of rereading and what (rediscovered) joy of writing!

**LV**. What kind of texts do you promote in your weekly reviews? Do you compromise with the post-postmodernist fashions? Could you foretell the road of literature from now on, the path of criticism? What is the direction Eugen Simion, the clear critic and the opinion leader will take?

**ES**. I do not dare foretell anything, either about literature or about myself. Critics do not make good prophets. I can only say postmodernism is dead (unfortunately before giving us masterpieces), we live in post-postmodernism, and the critic you are interviewing is ready to welcome life with peace of mind, though not with resignation...

4 May 2003, Bucharest

## Anne Stevenson, *I'm a fully qualified, radical desperado*

Interview with **ANNE STEVENSON** (born 3 January 1933), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: Your poetry relies on the music of emotion more than on the music of words. You write about small gestures and apparently insignificant memories. The result is an unforgettable mood, such as *To My Daughter in a Red Coat*, who comes 'so fast, so fast' and violates' the past'. The rhyme is and is not there. It can be analysed or ignored, as long as the mood works its magic. Are you a hardworking poet or one who works more on her sensibility than her words? Or both?

**ANNE STEVENSON**: I work very hard on all my poems, but most of the work consists of trying not to sound as if I had worked. I try to make them sound as natural as possible, but within a quite strict form, which to my ears has a lot to do with musical rhythm and sound.

**LV**. There is a sadness in your poems that never goes away and which gives them a meditative, hazy air. Is poetry a refuge from pain or a cure from it? Is writing a way of life, where painful emotions are propitiated?

**AS.** My earlier poems were sadder than my poems are today, perhaps because I wrote them in confusion or when I was unhappy. But I am not a melancholy person, quite the contrary, no one enjoys laughing more than I do. I write, or used to write, to explain to myself situations I couldn't otherwise solve or understand. Meditation comes very naturally to me.

**LV**. Blake seems to be an influence with you. Who are your literary models? Who are your literary friends?

**AS.** Blake has always been a favorite, the lyrics, not so much the prophetic books, but I suppose Yeats influenced me more as a young poet, and the American, Robert Frost. Elizabeth Bishop I call my mentor – I used to correspond with her and have written two books on her work. I have also learned a great deal from WH Auden and Louis MacNiece.

**LV**. One poem was written 'for Alasdair Gray.' Do you like his work? Is he a personal friend or a friend of the mind? Your imagination, like his, lie under Blake's sign. Why this dedication?

**AS.** I knew Alasdair Gray well when I lived in Glasgow in the 'Seventies – but his imagination is far more fanciful than mine. I wrote my poem for him after I had seen an exhibition of his paintings in Glasgow. The poem is also about living in Glasgow.

**LV**. Reading your poems one does not learn very much about your concrete life: where you were born, what you studied, your family, your friends. Your joys and sorrows clearly come through, though, in a vague veil of words. You do not imagine stories for you poems, like Matthew Sweeney, for instance. Could you reveal for the readers of this interview the story of your life? Who is Anne Stevenson, born 3 January 1933?

**AS.** I don't really approve of 'confessional' poetry, but I have no objections to telling you a little about myself in prose. I was born in Cambridge, England, when my father, the American philosopher, Charles Leslie Stevenson, was studying there with Wittgenstein and G.E. Moore. He was a good friend and colleague of Willard Orman Van Quine at Harvard, and he taught at Yale too, before becoming a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is most famous for his book called *Ethics and Language*. I grew up, the eldest of three sisters, in Ann Arbor and studied music, piano and cello, at school and at the university (I was a cellist until my deafness overcame me, but I play the piano every day, still.) I married a young Englishman in Cambridge in 1955 and have lived in Britain every since. My marriage and divorce rate is pretty high, but my
second husband – still a friend – was the Sinologist Mark Elvin whom I met at Harvard at the end of the nineteen-seventies. My present (4th) husband is Peter Lucas, son of a Cambridge classics don and nephew of the critic F.L. Lucas. Peter retired from the legal department of the Civil Service when we married in London in 1987. He is now chiefly writing on Charles Darwin. We are both confirmed Darwinians – so you see, with my deep scepticism I am not at all like Blake!

I have three children, a daughter Caroline by my first husband, and two sons by Mark Elvin. All now are over 35, grown up with children of their own. Peter Lucas and I live in Durham but spend a great deal of time in North Wales, where we have a cottage in the mountains, and in Vermont, USA, with my sister – who is a children's writer married to a poet. So you see, my milieu has been literary and intellectual most of my life, though I never wanted to be an academic myself.

**LV**. You have written a biography of Sylvia Plath. Why did you choose her? Do you feel related to her poetry? You are so much gentler and quieter. Not that exhibitionistic at all. Was she a friend?

**AS.** Sylvia Plath was just a month and a half older than I, and when she committed suicide I was only 30 – and very shocked and sorry. I never knew her personally. I did know Ted Hughes and I partly wrote the book to explain to

myself and others the complexities of a marriage that was for six years wonderfully productive of poetry and then ended in tragedy. Her story is one of the major tragedies of the 20th century. Had she lived, she might have outgrown her exhibitionism and craving for fame and success. Her poetry is extremely powerful, but studying it, I knew I didn't and couldn't move in that direction.

**LV**. Your poetry is not one of fear. If anything, it has an energy of the soul which gives courage to your reader. I could not find obsessions in your poems, hard as I tried. You record things casually, with an intensity which is carefully hidden from the first glance at the poem. What is your opinion of 'much ado about nothing' in poetry? Of the young poets who use angry, shameless words and shout their inability to feel? Does it happen today? A lot? Not at all? Are they poets? Can they be good at poetry in their own way?

**AS.** I don't like egotism, exhibitionism, or outright stupid showing off. I suspect I have a classical, rather than a romantic temperament. I greatly respect order and form in art – in all the arts. I remain loyal to Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert in music and to
Shakespeare and Jane Austen in literature. In my view, a great deal of what is being written today is not poetry, but on the other hand, I have a wide taste in contemporary literature. I especially admire Primo Levi and Wanda Szymborska, both of whom I read in translation. I love their intelligence and wit.

**LV**. *After the Fall* is a remarkable love poem. Here it goes:

*Adam*: Lady,
I've not had a moment's love
since I was expelled.
Let me in.

*Eve*: Lord,
I've not had a moment's rest
since I was a rib.
Put me back.

You are sharp and soft at the same time. The idea is coated in feeling. Yet this is obviously a poem which focusses on the mind. When you write, does the idea come first, or do you start from what you feel?

**AS.** *After the Fall* was written mainly as a joke. It wasn't a personal love poem at all, I was just feeling fed up with housekeeping and children. Yes, I do often write poems from the mind, but I hope I don't ignore feelings and emotions. A poem might be defined as thinking about feelings... about human feelings and frailties.

**LV**. Death and maternity are two major themes in your lines. Do you start from your real life when you write a poem, from something that actually happened to you that day or a while ago? Or do you prefer imagination to memory? Contemporary novels rely upon a kind of mnemotechnical skill, they use a word and expect the reader to remember it whenever it is used in a new, different context. You do that in poetry. Your words are fragile memories of other poems, other feelings. Are you aware of the pressure you put upon language, in your quiet, shy way?

**AS.** Well, I'm not really quiet or shy. Ask any of my friends! But I always ground my poetry in life itself. Poetry is an art of language, though, so I am always aware of every word's meaning, or multiple meanings. I play with language a great deal in my poems, and I enjoy that. I try to condense language, that is, I try to express complicated but I hope real emotions as simply as possible. But that doesn't mean the poems are simple, just that they are as truthful as I can make them. Each word bears its weight, so you have to read my poems quite slowly.

**LV**. *Making Poetry* begins thus:

You have to inhabit poetry
if you want to make it.

You do not make a poem, indeed – you actually inhabit it. Then comes the making. Is this making of the poem difficult? Do you work a lot for a poem? Is it more important to chisel or to catch quickly the right hue?

**AS.** Yes, I do make poetry after inhabiting an idea for a while. Poets have always been Makars, in the Scottish language, poietes in Greek.

**LV**. You have written sixteen volumes of poetry and biographies of Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop. You are also a literary critic. As a literary critic and a poet at the same time, what kind of literary criticism do you favour? These days, if a book of criticism does not have footnotes and does not converse with other critics before stating anything the author dares think on his own, it is worthless. If the critic does not use a jargon of terms invented and repeated as labels by many others, his language is – blasphemy – literature, not criticism. Shouldn't criticism be literature first and foremost? Is it science? Is readability unimportant as far as a critical text is concerned?

**AS.** I agree with you, there is far too much literary criticism of the wrong kind. That is why I never could have survived as an academic. Poets should ignore most criticism and get on with making poetry. I dislike literary jargon and never use it. Criticism has only one function and that is to help readers read and understand literature. It is not a science, it is an aid to art.

**LV**. I like to call contemporary writers Desperadoes because they make their own law and most often break all laws. Would you think this applies to your poems? Or do you see yourself as a submissive follower of tradition?

**AS.** No, no, never a submissive anything! I'm a fully qualified, radical Desperado. I have always made my own rules, in poetry as in life – though I have tried of late to cooperate more with my family. I do, however, believe that without order or pattern poetry is useless.
I like rhyme because it is memorable, I like form because having to work to a pattern gives me original ideas. I often make up a stanza form and then follow it in subsequent stanzas. But I can write perfect Shakespearian sonnets, too. I think a poet, like a painter, should be
a craftsperson. I don't like poetry that just slaps violent words on a canvas, as it were. I think we are living in terrible times for all the arts. We have a really decadent, sloppy, spoiled civilization here in the West, full of gimmicks and tricks and bad taste, very short on the kind of discipline and self-discipline a good poet needs. When everything is for 'fun' nothing is for the good. I am now seventy, rather glad, really, that I won't live to see the horrors to come in the 21st century. But then, life has always been full of horror,
hasn't it? The point is not to indulge in pseudo-made-up horrors but to face the real ones, stoically. Sylvia Plath admired Plato. I am a devotee of Heraclitus. All is flux.

7 October 2003

## **Liviu Ioan Stanciu, *I felt revolt against God, who left Romania***

Interview with **LIVIU IOAN STOICIU** (born 19 February 1950), Romanian poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: *The Train Flag* is a fundamental book for Desperado poetry. Compared to British poetry, this volume published in 1980 was very much in keeping with what was going on in Europe, although you can't have read much contemporary foreign poetry at the time, for the simple reason that it was hard to come by. You discovered Desperado rules on your own, partly because they were floating in the air, I guess. You began writing an oral, highly narrative type of poetry, with very concentrated, elliptical images, generously open to ambiguity. Do you have the feeling that you are an innovator in poetry? That maybe you write fictional poetry – poetry and fiction at the same time?

**LIVIU IOAN STOICIU**: An innovator? Fictional poetry? It all came natural – my feelings started thinking and craved for genuineness. I just wanted to be natural and honest in what I wrote. My debut, which you mention, was not easy in point of publication. Six years before, in 1974, I started approaching state publishing houses (the debut contests had been devised) but I did not get noticed by juries until much later, when I was in my very late twenties – so I was merely published with sequences of poems in two debut booklets, edited by the same publishing house which was to publish *The Train Flag* (Albatros), in 1978 and 1979. In 1974, Stefan Augustin Doinas introduced me – I was twenty-four at the time – as someone who had amazed him. He said he had had no idea one could write like that, that I was creating a new kind of poetry of the 'real', and six years later this became the distinctive feature of the poets of the '80s here. I could be the forerunner of the generation of the '80s. Doinas wrote then: 'I was amazed at the lack of caution in Stoiciu's handling of the words, mixing everyday and conventional language...'

I have always liked to experiment, to look for new ways. It is amazing to myself, in a way, because since 1975 till 1990 I lived in Focsani, a small town far from literary societies and publishing houses, isolated from the literary life and its academic experiments, so I cannot even think of any kind of influence. I did not have access to any literary review, I knew no writer, I was incredibly shy, and literary societies did not appeal to me, I felt I was too 'old' for that. Even for contests I would send my manuscripts by mail. Besides, I have never read a line in English and translations of recent poetry came too late for me. As my kind of poetry was not published at the time, I wrote for the drawer.

Did I have the feeling I innovated poetry? I wrote as it came – intuitively, spontaneously, breaking all rules. I felt that even the great poets of the '70s were not 'Romanian' enough, not 'human' enough, not close enough. I reacted to Romanian poetic models. I read poetry voraciously, I am a reader of poetry more than a writer of it. What I read was not entirely satisfactory to my sensibility.

Fictional poetry? Why not? I must have had an intuition of Postmodernism (I have always hated literary movements, their 'formula'). I stepped over the borders of literary genres and found the poetry of fiction. Or the fiction of poetry. I was not the first of course, if we think of Homer – we keep returning to origins and it makes us deeper and more genuine...

**LV.** The poems do not bear titles. they are episodes, pages from a diary. The words are overwhelmingly alive, as if we were coexisting with a poem that will soon be – though is not yet – written. I doubt anyone wrote just like you in the '80s. How did you reach the stream of consciousness and slippery words which inevitably became subversive? Censorship could not possibly hurt you because you were apparently harmless. Yet, besides the fight with the dragon of censorship, there is a deeper reason for your poetry, born more out of freedom than interdictions. You took an immense liberty with poetry, and you had no model for that. How was your poetic manner born?

**LIS**. You are a wonderful reader. I am indeed very free when I write. I never think of obstacles, censorship, or anything that surrounds me. I think of 'human condition'. When I write I am first and foremost honest with myself, I will never lie to myself then. This is the most intense form of freedom. I have never been a party member. I have never written my graduation paper, which has forced me to do humiliating jobs. I have never aimed at positions; after the revolution I did not know when to say no and it was a terrible source of agony. I have always been unable to adapt and seemed incomprehensible to everyone. I have wanted to be a 'common' person (no car, no villa, no trips abroad, no worldly ambitions), to be myself, never to hate myself for a shameful compromise. It has not been easy to fight human frailty in this way. My life has been full of renunciations and deprivations. I have lived from day to day – I could hardly afford vacations at the seaside or in the mountains, so I wrote and wrote, musing that a line is more than a vacation one easily forgets. I am trying to say I am a simple man, who does not know how to enjoy life – my very name is proof of that (connected with the word 'stoic', as my father's father came from the old Aromanian country of Macedonia, the country of 'stoics'). I have always and only wanted to be left alone. Unfortunately since 1981 I was followed by the Securitate and my life was miserable. But I was still free when I wrote. Subconsciously, self-censorship perfected my language, but I never gave up poetry for the sake of being subversive. A year after my debut I entered with *Heart of Rays* (1982) an infernal, adult world, and had to leave the paradise of my childhood free from all political regimes, as it can be seen in *The Train Flag*.

My poetic manner? It was born while I wrote for the drawer. Before my debut volume – when I was thirty – I had written twelve volumes. I mean that. On the days I do not write one line for the drawer I feel I have wasted a day of my life – and lately this has happened more and more often, so I must be slowly dying. All I can do is read and write. It is a matter of calling. I bear my cross (reading and writing). So how could I fail to find out my calling? I do not have a pattern. Whenever I sit down in front of the sheet of paper (I still write in longhand, not using the computer), I am

intensely anxious, I experience an existential alarm. Fortunately, though, I write freely, not caring about the masterpiece. I write 'exercises' which I later on revise if they look good.

**LV**. The second part of your volume is entitled *Dead Line*. The whole volume looks that way, like a goods train forgotten on an harmless track. It is actually full of aggressive texts and screams of revolt. How did they escape the long hand of censorship?

**LIS**. *The Train Flag* is my only volume (of those published before the revolution) which censorship did not touch in the least. Not even one comma was moved. My editors defended me and then they were in their turn protected by the prize of the Writers' Union that the volume received. With my second volume it was an altogether different matter. I was under the surveillance of the Securitate, censorship was a rule, I was forced to give up ten poems. In 1981, Virgil Ierunca read one of my anti-dictatorial poems on Radio Free Europe. Beginning with *Heart of Rays*, the Securitate held me tight as the volume was dedicated to the Pharaoh...

**LV**. The first part of your debut volume was entitled *Free!*, which can mean the train is free to go – all these pomes are in the margin of a railway track at the end of the world – but also the dream of any writer under communism: Free! This exasperatingly hard poetry, crushed by colloquialisms, by willfully unliterary words, was hiding a core of tenderness, of dream, of infinite hope. The child in these poems and the poet determined to fool censorship play pranks together, but theirs are serious, sad, heavy pranks. Nothing is joyful in these poems which we read with the joy of sharing and also with the terror of dystopia. This small flag in front of a heavy train is a dystopia. Was it your intention to create a dystopia, like a sign to shake the innocents of the system awake?

**LIS**. I like your interpretation. I was finding the joy to write. I lived there, in a lineman's cabin, I spent my childhood in it, two kilometres away from the nearest village, four kilometres from the nearest town. I wanted to make the reader feel my experience was his home, even if it was a dystopic place. To shake the innocents of the system awake? The system is, to me, destiny, the discovery of a world you never know if you were meant to visit or conquer or just leave behind. *Free* is dedicated to a sister I had, Sofia, who died at eighteen, smart and beautiful, an unfair death. I felt revolt against God, who left Romania as he did, and the system was his doing, unfortunately...

**LV**. Your ability to hide the subversive meaning has no limits. Here is the end of a poem, *Drops of Blood Fall Butterflies*:

I believed in nothing

else but
dream
(right?.. damn.. hooligans!.. my god, who
teaches them...), yes
(boo)

I must admit that the hidden ‘lizards’ in this text fascinate me as much as their emotional intensity. Rhyme is unimportant. Classical canons of poetry are dismembered. Poetry is free language. The style is gasping, full of holes, drowning in understatement. You are first and foremost a poet of understatement. In your subsequent volumes, understatement is a technique. I think that in this first volume, though, understatement is even stronger because it is forbidden yet present for everyone to see. Interdiction, in all its hideousness, was a fertile obstacle for those who had substance and inventivity. Do you think that today, a decade after the fall of communism, poetic mechanisms have changed much? Is poetry better now?

**LIS**. Till 1989, my inner life and dream were a free country. In *Heart of Rays* (on whose cover there is a manuscript poem ending in, ‘here, in nothingness, we lie in our own excrements//sinners in utopia’, which pushed my editors into disgrace because censorship overlooked it) the pomes are full of subversive meanings, outspoken dissent... The next two volumes are the same. Their mere titles say it all: *When Memory Returns* (1985), *A Parallel World* (1989). After *The Train Flag*, indeed, understatement becomes my technique, which is only natural, as a refinement of reading (and let us not forget I am my first reader). Has poetry changed after the revolution? Not to me. Journalism has, but not poetry, not fiction. I write now as I did before ( I have been writing since the age of fifteen, so I wrote twenty-five years under communism). I write freely and spontaneously. The subconscious has not noticed the fall of censorship. I have published after the revolution volumes written before and they fit in perfectly, since human life is the same: fear of tomorrow, physical pain, love, enmity, lost illusions. I did not write before 1989 poems which died with the system, and I do not do it today either. I rely upon generally valid themes.

**LV**. I find the following lines in the poem *One On Top*:

but the next morning we woke up
crying and... in front of our parents, pencil
in hand, we would write
promises, for life, to amend: thus, as it were
I made my debut in poetry (finding in

it new
discipline...)

Desperado poetry is an immense defiance, a mannerist coldness, a supreme carelessness. The poet hides behind the huge note, 'So what?'. Whatever the surface will not allow is crammed backstage: emotion, tenderness, desire to be approved of. Boasting with lack of education is a way of saying, 'I won't be fooled...' Vulgarity hides vulnerability. The essence lies deep down, unseen. Which is very poetic, after all. What would poetry be if it did not hide enough? What do you hide? What is the unseen face of your poems?

**LIS**. Very appealing questions. The unseen face of the poem? An incomprehensible mixture of daily subconscious frustrations. Would I be sane without poetry? If I had not written poetry, I would have committed suicide long ago. Being able to write is my insurance that I shall live tomorrow. The poem is my outlet for tensions, emotions, wit, language, techniques. What am I hiding? A huge existential ignorance (biographical, cultural, metaphysical). I hide a significant, cultured LIS vocabulary (in books and papers), which vanishes increasingly, because of my lack of time to enrich it, because creativity is dulled, because objects that exhaled poetry when I was young no longer do so, because I see the ill-omen of lucidity everywhere... I lose my patience at the writing table: if in half an hour I fail to finish a poem, I give it up. What more do I hide? I live from one LIS year to the next (this is my fifty-second LIS year), each beginning on 19 February, my birthday, when I plan to write 'exercises' once or twice a week...

**LV**. You have an obvious logic of verbal association. You start from one word and end miles away. You start snowfalls of meanings. Your second technique is the multiplication of the verse in geometrical progression with the number of words on a page. This is sometimes a very fresh, surprising effect; at other times it requires slow, painful rereading. You use the words just like Joyce, who strove for the preverbal image of emotion or thought. Your poetry is a preverbal poetry on the whole, if such a paradox exists. You catch the meaning by means of broken words, exclamations, dots. Do you feel you belong to the stream of consciousness technique? Who are your models in literature?

**LIS**. You know more about my poetry than I do. I do not like to think of its creation, to become aware of the mechanism. Lucidity might destroy the poem... If it comes, it comes. I write 'exercises'. Do I see myself in the stream of consciousness? I sure do. But no models. I have always loved great poetry, Romanian or other. I do not worship any poet but feel grateful when I find a great line. When the famous generation of poets of the '80s here was in love with English or American poetry of the end of the 20th century, I focussed on Iannis Ristos... And Romanian avant-garde. I found myself in the fictional style of the West much later.

**LV**. For those who only know your poetry, who is Liviu Ioan Stoiciu the man? What is his biography, as much as it can be shared?

**LIS**. Who is LIS the man? Here is my autobiography... I was born in a lineman's cabin, while my father worked on a railway. I was born on 19 February 1950. It was a Sunday, between the Water Bearer and Pisces, between four and six o'clock in the morning. It was a hard winter (snow rose above our windows) and my father's mother was the midwife. My mother was a peasant's daughter. Unfortunately, when I was less than two years old, she died in that cabin, struck by lightning. Her family were under a curse: my mother's mother died in church (ill omen: the church was closed and purged), one of my mother's brothers committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a train, another of her brothers was run over by a train when he came for my baptism. Before me, my mother had a baby girl Livia (I get my name from her, although officially I am only Ioan) who only lived for a few months. A year after my mother's death, my father (who constantly worked away from home and could not raise me by himself) remarried another peasant's daughter, with whom he had four children, three girls and a boy. Till he remarried and even after, I was raised by a fileman's daughter who was in love with my father, and I learned a lot from her, love of books included. My father comes from a Stoic Macedonian father (Aromanian) and a mother who was a refugee from Ardeal (with 'mixed blood' – some spoke Hungarian in her family). I was six when I started school and had to walk two kilometres across a field in winter, when the wolves scared me to death. In high school I edited literary reviews at home, all handwritten, containing poetry and fiction, diary, drama and journalism. I flunk Russian one year. I was expelled because I mistreated the communist propaganda boards in school. When seventeen, I left my hometown and took up philology. Destitute, I worked as a substitute teacher and then I asked to join the army before my time, which landed me on the Czechoslovakian front (Czechoslovakia had just been invaded). I paid for that dearly, I could not stand army life. Back from the army, I went to work in a copper mine and then became a book accountant there. I practised many professions and changed many places. I wound my way from local paper to local paper. Unafraid of communist authorities, I was soon in disgrace. In the autumn of 1971 I was sent to study journalism in Bucharest. I chose to study literature instead and lost one year. I tried to survive working as a clerk and with my hands. I did not graduate in Bucharest, got married and left for Cluj, where I meant to start studying again but could not find a job to support myself. On 25 July my son was born, after we had left Cluj for Focsani. I gave up drinking, smoking and tramping about. I did various unskilled jobs for a year (the brandy factory, cleaning cisterns, wine factory, bricklaying). Then I became a tutor. I lived with my wife's parents in a three-room apartment, with her brother, who was mentally ill. I moved to Focsani, where I was a librarian. In 1981 the Securitate was after me. The Writers' Union refused to include me, although my debut volume had received its prize). I only joined it after the revolution. On 3 October 1989 I signed the letter against Ceausescu's reelection. On 24 November I sent an open letter asking for a union of the non-communist writers. I was tried and I

refused to deny I had signed those two letters. The revolution made me a leader of sorts, the people forced me to. I left politics in March 1990 and became editor of the literary review *Romanian Life* in Bucharest. It is a long story...

**LV**. What is the direction of poetry today? Clarity or fall? None, maybe?

**LIS**. Poetry is read by specialists, out of curiosity or as a critic's duty, for comparison or competition. It is also a cure for the reader who has had enough of medicines and is trying to avoid the thought of suicide. Reading means less today, when the media are everywhere. The reader of postmodern poetry is educated, conversant, overwhelmed by good poetry. Pupils and students also read poetry. It matters if a poet makes it in the schoolbooks and changes the young people's taste in poetry. It rarely happens and it is a matter of luck. I thought it incredible that I did so myself.

**LV**. In *The Warm Rain Rolls Its Wheels* you wrote: 'I am the man/ of disorder'. Disorder is your name in poetry. Apparent disorder, accompanied by fantastic powers of verbal order. What does the perfect poem look like? How much can a word do? Can the world still be ruled by a poetry line, now, after the fall of communism, when poetry is no longer a refuge as it used to be? Is your old sorrow healed? I wonder, would you be able to make poetry out of your Securitate file, if you could see it now?

**LIS**. Disorder implies order... I am a border person (born between two signs, two mothers, two poetic generations – the '70s and the '80s). I find myself in extreme positions and feel I belong to neither (see my family life, my education). I am a person of many changes (politics, homes and jobs) and of inconclusiveness. I may well die before my poetic work is whole, but never mind... I have the calling of insufficiency. I never end anything. I strive for a whole (a book, a love story, emotional 'glory') but I pull everything down at the last moment, just before perfection is reached. The perfect poem? I am so full of doubts, I cannot subscribe to the certainty of perfection in this life. I am resigned to 'exercises' and, if they stand the test of time, I publish them...

Has my debut sorrow healed? The more aware I have become of the power of the word, the more alien I feel to myself, to my own writing. I would not like to start all over again.

Writing poetry in the margin of my Securitate file! I could do that, no doubt... My Securitate file is so private, so alive, it would be an extraordinary thought.

November 2, 2002, Bucharest

## Matthew Sweeney, *A poet should never pay much attention to his or her critics*

Interview with **MATTHEW SWEENEY** (born 1952), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU**: You are a poet of incredible stories put in verse, and of the tenderest nature narrated. Your poems may look absurd at first sight, but this only because your sensibility defends itself from too much reality. There are also times when you do the reverse: you use too much reality to stifle any possible sentimentality. But your secret is soon out. Reading your *Selected Poems* I started by believing the cover, which said I would be entertained, and ended up sad, concerned and sharing your every mood. Which is what poetry should do. On the other hand, I find it a common feature (one of the very few common features) of what I call Desperado poetry that the narrative replaces confession. How would you describe your approach to poetry? Purely lyrical, mainly narrative, meditative or plain sentimental?

**MATTHEW SWEENEY**: The way I describe my poetry, when asked, is to say I think of it as imagistic narrative. As this suggests, I consider poetry – or at least this kind of poetry – to have a lot in common with film. I am not at all interested in confessional poetry, or indeed much in autobiographical poetry (although there are some poems which are autobiographical in nature, and many other poems have autobiographical details smuggled in). One early TLS review put it that I was more a poet of the world than the self, and it is true that I prefer on the whole to imagine myself into other people's experiences than to write out of my own. Most of my poetry has a narrative element. Some of it strays beyond realism into the territory I call alternative realism (which is not to be confused with surrealism, although many people do this), and it often mixes humour and seriousness. Both these latter tendencies are common in the Irish literary tradition, also in the German literary tradition that I studied at university and had such a profound effect on me.

**LV**. When I talk about Desperado poetry, I mean a contemporary grouping of poets whose only common feature might be the fact that they tend to be different from everybody else, even different from their own previous work. It is a non-grouping, maybe, but when you try to make sense of an age, you look for labels. I hate Postmodernism, so I am replacing it. As I read more and take more interviews, new features seem to be shared by the Desperado poets. Yours is the **would-be mood**. I shall quote one illustrative poem, *The Hat*:

A green hat is blowing through the Harvard Square
and no one is trying to catch it.
Whoever has lost it has given up –

perhaps, because his wife was cheating,
he took it off and threw it like a frisbee,
trying to decapitate a statue
of a woman in her middle years
who doesn't look anything like his wife.
This wind wouldn't lift the hat alone,
and any man would be glad to keep it.
I can imagine – as it tumbles along,
gusting past cars, people, lampposts –
it sitting above a dark green suit.
The face between them would be bearded
and not unhealthy, yet. The eyes
would be green, too – an all-green man
thinking of his wife in another bed,
these thoughts all through the green hat,
like garlic in the pores, and no one,
no one pouncing on the hat to put it on.

You rarely write autobiographically, or you do not write ostensibly so. Such small stories are what you prefer: narratives of what would be true, if... Some are violent, shocking, unexpected, absurd. This one is desperately tender. Many stories about a woman leaving a man are in your work painfully tender, and also grudging. You spice the mixture with an exquisite sense of humour. As a reader, one laughs with bitter tears. How do you feel as a poet? What is the mood in which you write these parables?

**MS.** What mood do I write in? It depends. Usually I am busy imagining myself into someone else's experience, with the necessary distance that implies. I never know much about a poem before I write it – Robert Frost puts this brilliantly when he says that he likes it best that a poem begins as a tantalising vagueness, and in the act of writing it either finds its thought and becomes that poem or it comes to nothing and ends up in the bin. So the act of writing is a process of curiosity and discovery, with the unconscious mind leading, and everything focussing on finding the right concrete details. The hat, for example, in the poem you quote is taking the weight of all that abstract emotion – Eliot's objective correlative.

**LV**. Since your poems reveal nothing concrete about their author, I have no idea who Matthew Sweeney the poet really is. Could you tell me and your readers whatever can be revealed of your life and hopes? When were you born, what is your education, your job, your family life?

**MS.** I tend to think that what the poems reveal of their author is enough, or at least that the poems are the most important bit. Much is best kept private. I can tell you though that I was born in Co. Donegal, Ireland in 1952, and make my living as a freelance writer. I don’t have a job, in other words, beyond writing, and other activities connected with this – giving readings, doing workshops, poetry residencies, the odd commission, radio stuff and a bit of reviewing. I have a degree in German and English.

**LV**. A recurrent character of your poems is a woman who goes away. She goes away in various landscapes and situations. Do you attach any particular meaning to this mood of departure without return?

**MS.** There are recurrent images and dramatic situations in the work of all writers. The woman going away is simply a dramatisation of insecurity – relationships are important things for me. Insecurity runs all through the work (a recent review of the *Selected* said that the poems convert anxiety into a source of illumination) but has to be dramatically represented. Frost also said that a poem is nothing if it is not dramatic, that it need not declare itself as so but it is drama or nothing.

**LV**. Death likes poetry, in your lines. It can be seen in the following poem:

*Ghost Story*

I will break into a tomb
in Highgate cemetery,
one that hasn’t been opened
for a hundred years.
The bones in there won’t mind.
I’ll light a candle
and set up my camp bed,
then I’ll read ghost stories
till the bones rattle and come together
to form a skeleton.

I'll watch flesh form
on that skull again,
then the chest, the legs,
until a smiling old man
dressed in tweeds
sits down beside me
and asks me to read on.

You have a sense of continuity, you despise fears or picturesque cemetery sadness. Thinking of the metaphysical poets, I can only say you do nothing of the kind. Yet the grave is often the background of your poems. Maybe this is the mistake: it is not the background, it is the starting point, and from there you restore life. To continue my definition of your poetry, it is a would-be restoration of life. Is this recurrent motif of death (which is as old as the hills in poetry, even though it looks so new in yours) an obsession that could assimilate you to Eliot, the pre-romantics, or anybody else whose identity you could disclose?

**MS.** Death is common visitor to poetry, and some would say particularly Irish poetry. And yes, it frequently makes an appearance in my work. But to write about death is to write about life – several of the poems, indeed (including the one you quote), bring dead people back to life, or give them roles they might have had in life. I do not feel that this element in the poems necessarily connects me to other writers. The poet who was closest to me when I started out was the American poet Sylvia Plath, and I did learn lots from her. Coleridge was my favorite poet at school.

**LV**. Maybe death is synonymous with solitude. The following poem brings the two together in an extraordinary image of modern man, who knows so much more yet has so much less than ever before:

*Abandoned*

After two days he knew they were lying,
they wouldn't send anyone to rescue him,
he was stuck here, forever, on the moon
without even a dead man for company.
Why did they load so much dust and rocks
the module couldn't lift off?

How many experiments could they do?
How long before he'd replace some of the dust?
He looked up at Earth where his wife was.
What would they say to her? More lies,
he knew. His children would never learn
he hadn't died in a meteor shower,
and neither of them would visit his grave.
He wouldn't even have a grave!
He countered this by thinking back
to the last time he and his wife
had made love, to the borsch she'd cooked
that night, the vodka they'd drunk.
What was she doing now? Did she
know he was beaming thoughts at her
across the thousands of miles of space,
hoping that in her sleep she'd beam some back?

Everyday clarity brings forth an image not many would have thought of: alone on the moon, pining for earth, lost to love. This poem is an emblem of your sensibility. I have noticed that these days clarity of style goes hand in hand with tenderness. The more distant and defying the poet wants to be, the more encoded his words are. Yours are relaxed and limpid. Your soul is on a platter for the reader to touch. What do you expect from this reader?

**MS.** A third Frost quote is this: 'Poetry is a fresh look and a fresh listen.' I came across the situation of this poem in a supposed interview in a wacky American newspaper. I thought two things simultaneously – what a preposterous story, I don't believe a word of it; and what a fantastic metaphor for loneliness. So I set about imagining being up there alone on the moon. Everything comes down to metaphor in the end – and metaphor can be localised, or extended into parable, taking in the whole poem. I value clarity greatly, and much of the work in writing a poem is to get to this clarity. What do I expect from my readers? A response of some sort – in this instance, to also imagine themselves stranded on the moon, away from their loved ones. To see, perhaps, the comic side of the poem first, then the sad or serious.

**LV**. Poetry seems to have two gates open today: limpid language or fireworks of poetic devices squeezed from contorted words. Between clarity and obscurity the border is very clear. You are one of the few clear poets, who do not

want to make the word an obstacle, but a bridge. Fiction writers have learnt this lesson the hard way: they had a Joyce to run away from (which will never be totally possible). Eliot was not such a challenge. I have been reading British new poetry for years now, interviewing poets. The clear ones are those I cherish. They usually answer in relaxed, long explanations. The more complicated a poet gets, the less I can understand from his answers and the more elliptical these answers are. What do you think of interviews? They cannot explain the poetry, of course, but they can make it known. Is there a particular question you would have liked to be asked yet somehow never have been, so far?

**MS.** What do I think of interviews? They can help get the poetry noticed, and maybe give it some context that might help the reader. They are not of much interest to the poet
him- or herself. I cannot think of a question I am dying to be asked that I haven't been asked yet.

**LV**. Do you have a favorite type of critic in mind when you think of what criticism might find to say about your poems? I must confess I am partial to creative critics, whom Eliot hated. I think criticism should be as clear as the texts it approaches, or more. I also think no critic should use ready made labels and terms to prove his point. The same as the author takes pride in creating his words anew, the critic should at least explain everything he states, and not rely on footnotes to let us know when the term he invokes was first created and subsequently modified by so and so. An informed critic is, to my mind, a critic who has read a lot, not one who is able to juggle with other critics' words. I am afraid I am attacking scholarly criticism. What do you think of it?

**MS.** I prefer a critic who is also a poet – but one who is open to ways of writing different to his or her own. Too many critics come with very narrow prejudiced ideas of what constitutes poetry. For example, there are formalist critics who dismiss anything that isn't formalist, or critics who can't accommodate humour or non-highbrow subject-matter, believing either of these compromise the seriousness or artiness of the endeavour. I am talking about reviews in the main here, although I'm finding that a review of a Selected Poems is halfway between a review and a critical article, bringing in an overview of the whole range of work presented in the Selected. I haven't had much experience of the more academic end of criticism, although there have been two or three articles and papers presented at conferences. These provide a less familiar reading of the work, often fascinating in the claims it makes for it, and the way it links it to the work and concerns of others. But a poet should never pay much attention to his or her critics.

**LV**. It seems at times that few people are readers of poetry these days. Mostly other poets or academics. Books of poetry are published in a rather small number of copies. What do you think of the future of poetry? So many poets and so few readers. Is anything going to change, to bring poetry to the front, as it has been through twenty centuries and more?

**MS.** I agree that poetry could do with more readers, but things are not as bad as is commonly thought – or as bad as they were, say, twenty years ago. I am thinking primarily of Britain here, which is where I have been most operational in. A poetry book is rarely going to reach the best-seller list (though Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* did), but it can sell anything between two and five thousand copies. This doesn't come near the sales of a successful novelist, but it is not nothing. Add to this, the smaller, perhaps, sales figures of foreign editions – sometimes in translation – and anthology and magazine publication. Also, the considerable increase in public readings, and the sometimes large audiences that attend (my reading at the Ledbury Poetry Festival two weeks ago, for example, had an audience of 150, and a couple of years ago I had 700 at the Adelaide Festival, in Australia). There will be people in these audiences who would never read a poetry book, but love hearing it read aloud. Poetry is also popular on radio, and people are beginning to make tapes and cds of poets reading their work (the British Council, for example, in conjunction with the northern English publisher Bloodaxe, are bringing out a series of Poetry Quartets). If the literary editors of the broadside newspapers gave more space to poetry, that would help. Also if everyone who wrote poetry would buy it and read it as well. There is no shortage of people who write it. The best-selling book I have ever published is *Writing Poetry*, a handbook co-written with the English poet John Hartley Williams, giving technical advice on how to do it. So far it has sold something in the region of 15,000, which says it all.

**LV**. What makes your write poetry? You could be a fiction writer easily, and maybe the story would attract more readers, even a film-producer. Is the screen tempting? This battle between the screen and the page (between television and real art, mainly) is dispiriting. Who is the winner? Are you confident in the fate of the art you have chosen?

**MS.** What makes me want to write poetry? I have always been drawn to poetry. I found the noise of it attractive, the mystery of it – the way it leaves so much to the reader ( a student put it to me once that the reader of a poem must, as it were, finish the writing of the poem) – and how it can tell a story in a short space. When one is used to operating so sparely, the sprawl of prose is not attractive. W.H. Auden said once: 'The novelist has to be the whole of boredom.' I *have* written some prose. There is a children's novel, *Fox*, coming out in November, but even this is written in very short, spare chapters – in other words, as close to poetry as possible. I am also very late with a book of short stories (for adults), some of which have appeared in anthologies or periodicals. Film attracts me greatly for the reasons I give at the beginning of my first answer, but I don't think anyone's going to invite me to direct my first film. I'll have to keep making my films in poems.

July 2002

## **Graham Swift, *'Desperado' perhaps conveys some of the individualism of writing***

Interview with **GRAHAM SWIFT** (born 1949), British novelist

**LIDIA VIANU**: Among other things, I mean by Desperado a person who mixes literary genres in a unique blend. In *Waterland*, you combine fiction, poetry, history, essay, diary, even teaching, in a Faulknerian bewitching medley. Do you feel this is a feature that brings you together with writers like Julian Barnes, Alasdair Gray, Kazuo Ishiguro, to name only a few disparate examples? Do you do it deliberately or is it as inevitable as breathing, as T.S. Eliot stated about criticism?

**GRAHAM SWIFT**: I think the mixing of different genres or modes of writing applies only to some of my fiction, especially *Waterland* – though *Shuttlecock* contains a book within a novel and *Ever After* a journal within a novel. I don't think this is either my principal approach to writing or something I have consciously intended or developed. You go where the spirit takes you or do what a particular narrative demands. The book within a book, for example, is a way of setting up a sort of dramatic dialogue between living and dead characters, between past and present, which of course can't literally occur. In *Waterland* the impression of a medley perhaps reflects my ambition at the time of writing. It was my third novel, I felt I could take risks, experiment and stretch myself in ways I hadn't done before. None of this, however, was for its own sake or simply to draw attention to itself, it had to be justified. It was wonderful, for example, to have created a narrative fabric in which it was possible to insert what is almost an essay on the natural history of the eel, but the chapter on the eel has its relevance and purpose within the whole. The recent tendency in my writing has been away from this sort of authorial mixing of styles towards a tone that's governed by my characters. *Last Orders* is also a 'mixture', but a mixture of several first-person voices and narratives. The story is pieced together by the characters. The author, I hope, seems hardly present.

I don't group myself with other contemporary writers or feel that I'm part of some collective undertaking. Critics like to make these connections but I think the extent to which writing is a very singular process is often under-estimated. When you write a novel you go away and, for a long time, do something all on your own. Your word 'Desperado' intrigues me. It's not how I'd describe myself – though writing can have its share of desperation! On the other hand, 'Desperado' perhaps conveys some of the individualism of writing. To write a novel, you need, in a way, to outlaw and uproot yourself. It's a solitary adventure that one day, perhaps, your readers might share.

**LV.** Stream of consciousness writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf meant to smash the narrative and submerge fiction in lyricism. You are also overwhelmingly lyrical, but in a totally different manner. You have returned to the pleasure of the well told story and enjoy the narrative. Your account of it is meant to baffle and instigate the reader to active rereading. Between lyricism and the narrative, which is dearer to you? Would you like to be called a poet or a novelist, or both? Do you complicate your narration willfully or is it inevitable, again?

**GS**. The story, the narrative is the most important thing but I'm very happy if my fiction is also felt to have a poetic element. I've written scarcely any poetry in the formal sense. I suppose I'd prefer to write the kind of prose that can become poetry rather that the kind of poetry that might become prose! In any case, I don't think 'poetry' is something that just belongs to verse. My writing may sometimes be 'lyrical', though that word, to me, suggests a conscious striving after beauty and rapture. More generally, I'd say that one function of fiction is simply to celebrate what's worth celebrating about life. I hope my fiction does this, even as it may also explore some of the darker areas of life. I believe that there's an innate celebration in any act of creation. I think story-telling, however sophisticated and modern we may get about it, answers a deep need in human nature. There's something primitive and magical about it.

If my narratives get complicated, it's not willful. I think life's complicated. Too many people try to simplify it.

**LV**. Your novels are Mona-Lisa-like narratives, because from every corner a main hero stares at you. You have no minor heroes, they are all minds in progress, brought to the front. Their stories mingle, the novel is a merry-go-round meant to shock the reader into remembrance of things past. Yet history is made present. You choose informal narration and join hands with all readers. This is one face of the Desperado writer: the affectionate narration. If you mean to be close to the reader, how does that go together with your devious amalgamation of incidents in the story? How do you help readers find their way out of the maze of history and feelings brought up to date for each of them?

**GS**. I tend to prefer first-person narrative – 'minds in progress' as you say. This gives you an immediate and intimate access to your character, and in the end implies a certain kind of relationship with the reader too. I want to be 'with' my characters, on their level. I don't want to be superior to them or to pretend to know more than they do. This expresses my basic position as a novelist. I may be an author but I don't think of myself as any kind of 'authority'. I don't have answers to things – though I have plenty of questions (*Waterland* is full of them) and plenty of doubts. There are a good many people who profess to have answers, to know things, to tell us what is so or what we should do, but this is not what novels are for or why I'm a novelist. An American writer once said we all lead lives of quiet desperation. Perhaps, but I think we all lead lives of quiet confusion. The novel is a form in which you can be true to the confusion of life. I'm not different from my readers and I certainly don't want to have power over them. I'm confused too, I'm in the same boat. I think of the relationship of writer and reader as one of sharing. I want to share confusion – but not

directly and, I hope, not unconstructively. So I offer the confusion of my characters who are nonetheless trying to steer some kind of sustainable and hopeful course through their confusion. That course is story-telling. I believe good story-telling can, without denying or misrepresenting the actual confusion of life, redeem it.

**LV**. You build what a Desperado critic might call delayed plots. Your main device is the constant interruption. It brings suspense and ensures the quality of breathtaking reality. You break chronology (which is an old trick), but you also break the point of view, as the story comes from an 'I', a 'he', or many such voices (this is much more recent). It happens a lot in *The Sweet-Shop Owner*. Do you value the tricks you use, or are they just means to an end? How much store do you set by innovating the narrative technique?

**GS**. I don't feel at home with straight, sequential narrative. This partly because I think that moving around in time, having interruptions and delays, is more exciting and has more dramatic potential, but I also think it's more truthful to the way our minds actually deal with time. Memory doesn't work in sequence, it can leap to and fro and there's no predicting what it might suddenly seize on. It doesn't have a chronological plan. Nor does life, otherwise the most recent events would always be the most important.

I'd hate to think that any narrative technique I use is merely a trick, and I don't believe in technical innovation for its own sake. Novels shouldn't be novelties. I think I have quite a strong sense of form, but form for me is governed by feeling, by the shaping and timing of emotion. I think there's a connection with music, since music ultimately obeys an irrational, emotional logic. Music is also, famously, a language without words, and, though it may seem odd for a writer to say it, I have a respect for the wordless. The wordless things are often the most important things. I don't think of myself as possessing words, I have to find them, and it's a writer's task to try to find words for things that may be ultimately beyond words or very hard to express clearly. I certainly don't think words (though I love them) are an end in themselves. They're a window to something. So often the best words, words which directly and accurately transmit feeling, are the least noticeable. It means much more to me if a reader says they were moved and gripped by something I've written than if they say they admired my words.

**LV**. You inherit devices from Henry James (the multiple point of view), Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and you do one thing they never dared do: in your novels, your solitary characters abolish the future. You go beyond the stream of consciousness, you upgrade it, so to say. Do you feel related to old techniques? How would you define your own identity, whether Desperado or not?

**GS**. I think my answer to the previous question really covers this. I wouldn't want to define or categorise myself in literary terms. This is for critics to do. If there's anything 'new' in my work then it's because my subject-matter has

demanded it, not because I seek 'newness'. Originality is a real virtue but I think it resides in the unique spirit and vision that can belong to an individual author, not simply in the devising of new things. While I'm sure I belong to my time (in ways that I may not always be aware of) I have a healthy respect for past writers and their 'old techniques'. It's the content that matters, the techniques are secondary. The content – human nature – doesn't change that much. I want to write about the things we have in common and matter most and perennially to us, the core of human experience. New clothes don't alter the flesh and blood underneath.

**LV**. *Out of This World* and *Shuttlecock* are intensely personal experiences, related with an eye open to irony. How do you make lyricism and irony coexist? Would you agree that this is a typical feature of your generation, the Desperado writers?

**GS**. Lyricism and irony can coexist, and need to – imagine looking at the world entirely without one or the other. I'm a great believer in 'this *and* that', in complexity, even paradox. Confusion again! The title of one of my novels – *Waterland* – is itself an ambiguity, a 'both' not an 'either/or'. I'm fascinated by borderline conditions, or rather by the difficulty of drawing a distinct line between some fundamental human concerns – between past and present, say, or history and story. There's an even more impossible line, which I think all writers of fiction sooner or later come to reflect on – the line between what we agree to call the real world and a world that exists but mainly in our heads, the world of imagination, memory and invention. In short, the line between fact and fiction. I think we're all hybrid, ambiguous creatures inhabiting both worlds and we can be lyrical about each. As soon as we're aware of how imprecise the border is between the two, irony steps in.

**LV**. One central theme of your novels is the connection, the relationship parents-children. It has ups and downs, the generation gap is painfully present, but overcome. Parenthood is a highly awkward position. Are you ever autobiographical in what you write? Are your novels so lyrical because of the burden of their author's sensibility?

**GS**. I agree. Parent-child and cross-generational relationships are everywhere in my work. I don't think I'm peculiar in this: being someone's son or daughter or being someone's father or mother are fundamental human experiences and have always been written about. People say I write intensely and intimately about the parent-child relationship, but I don't have children myself. This is a good example of how I'm not an 'autobiographical' writer. In general, I'm against the autobiographical approach to fiction – turning your own direct experiences into the stuff of fiction. I don't base my characters on people I know, or on myself. Good things have been written in this way but I think it's a sort of anti-fiction, since it's really fact in disguise. The biggest challenge and reward in fiction – it's what fiction's *for* – is to enter

experience *other* than your own, yet to identify with it – to try to know what it's like to be someone else. In any case, fiction should create and discover. It can't do this if its only source is the personal. Of course, at the deepest level, every novelist's work must be about himself or herself – where else does it come from? – but there's no reason why your direct personal experiences should be interesting to anyone else and they can only provide limited material. Sooner or later you have to *imagine*. I believe it's the author's imagining (as opposed to mere recounting) that sets alight the reader's imagination and provides the special thrill of fiction: that something that we know is made up can yet become alive and authentic, can be felt as real and true, as if it's happening to us.

Returning to parent-child relationships, my own childhood was quite happy and secure, and my relations with my parents good. So the autobiographical explanation wouldn't account for the many unhappy or vexed family situations in my work – and, incidentally, writers are generally supposed to emerge from *unhappy* childhoods! Another point I'd make about relationships across the generations is that they are simply something the novel has scope for. The novel can deal, preeminently, with long periods of time, with historical perspective, with whole lives and the changes they undergo, and this can be extended to dealing with more than one generation, indeed several. As a matter of literary opportunity as well as of broad philosophy, it would be a shame not to explore this possibility.

**LV**. Your fiction invites quotation. Memorable sentences could be short, haiku-like poems. The situations you build are symbolic and deeply tender, touching. You build lives more than real plots. The plot of your novels is simple, its complications and life cargo are endless. Lyrical disorder seems to be your halo. Breaking the order of sensibility is a Desperado feature (the stream of consciousness broke conventions, but Desperadoes break the broken soul). What is the real way you want your readers to follow when they read you?

**GS**. I like the idea of 'building lives' and I like the expression 'life cargo'. My immediate narrative and plot may not require that the full history of a character, who may be in their middle or late years, is known. But my instinct would be to delve, at least a little, into the earlier life of that character, even where it doesn't seem relevant – it may become relevant. I think characterisation itself partly depends on having a sense of the character's existence before they entered, as it were, the immediate story – just as in life we get a better understanding of and sympathy for someone, if we learn what they were like before we met them. A sense of what an adult was like as a child, that they *were* indeed once a child, can open a door into them. I have often tended to write about characters older than myself (though I don't get any younger!): I think I respect the freight, the weight of experience. In any case, I have a strong faith that nobody is ever only what they are at any one time. We contain our former selves, even when we may think we have shed them. So inside the old man is still the youth and the child. All the persisting layers of accumulated experience make up the person, the unique life. It's never just what you see. I think the novel is wonderfully equipped to illuminate this.

I'm touched if any of my sentences are memorable enough for quotation and if some of my situations have a symbolic power. I hope this has something to do with my desire to write about that core of experience common to us all. I hope I touch the universal, but I learn more and more that the key to the universal is in the particular and the local. Novels aren't statements, they're actual, particular experiences – experiences we can add to other experiences in our lives. When we come to the end of a good novel we have the feeling of having lived through something. That's what I'd like my readers to have, an experience.

**LV**. *Ever After* is a novel on lost love, lost history, lost love of life, yet somehow intense presence of all these. The novel, like all the others, is an endless goodbye. You use, among other tricks (such as mingling history and contemporaneity), intertextuality. You quote a diary that records not only the previous century, but actually an experience of the whole history of mankind. You have a desire for globality. It is all in the memoryland of your characters' stories. Do you write with your mind (understanding of everything you know) or with your soul (lyrical perception of the world)?

**GS**. I hope I write with my soul first and my mind (remembering what I've said about knowledge and confusion) second. But I think you have to write with both – heart and head. This question highlights *Ever After* and its sense of loss, its valedictory quality, but I think these things may be an inherent part of all story-telling. We tell a story because something *has* happened. We are made to contemplate the past – and what's passed. Stories give us hindsight but also lead us to a sense of transience, mortality. This needn't be sad or dispiriting, however, since it's in the very nature and energy of stories to provide a defence against time, a glow against dark. Stories are on the side of life, they go with life – even when they're about death. *Ever After* is partly a love story which reverses the familiar pattern. It starts with an unhappy ending and ends with a happy beginning. My latest novel, *Last Orders*, is in certain obvious ways about death, but it's about death in order to be about life. It's often – literally and comically – about life getting in the way of death. That, I think, is only how it should be.

November 23, 2000

## George Szirtes, *I think the problem with us desperadoes is that we constitute too diverse a landscape for now*

Interview with **GEORGE SZIRTES** (born 29 November 1948), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** I cannot help thinking of Blake and Alasdair Gray when I think of your poetry. Blake, because he was an engraver and highly visual, though totally different from your more modern art, closer to film than traditional painting, and Gray because he was a painter, and also the author of a remarkable dystopia. Your whole poetry could be looked upon as a gentle dystopia, if there is such a thing. You create a waterfall of images which take care of their coherence themselves. You are at the same time visual and narrative. I call this a Desperado feature, concealing lyricism in what is apparently the property of another art, and also mixing many genres, even arts into one. Do you feel more than a poet – meaning, also a novelist, painter, historian, geographer – when you think of your work? Is hybridization of genres something you have devised deliberately, or did it come naturally, as you went on writing?

**GEORGE SZIRTES:** I think you have asked the most intelligent questions I have yet been asked and also the most difficult. You must be a remarkably perceptive reader so I feel flattered. I will do my best to answer you.

I admired Blake enormously when I was a student and still do. Being trained as a painter he was an obvious model and especially attractive because of his visionary approach to Christianity. A little background here. You may know that I am completely self-taught as a reader and writer. My last school exams under the A level system we have here in England, were in Physics, Chemistry and Zoology. I was a precocious learner in Budapest and a very early reader (reading fluently by two, according to my parents). I was also very successful in Hungarian school. When we first arrived in England I picked up the language so fast that within a year I was top of the class of English children. My parents' hopes were therefore very high, and they saw me as a doctor or an academic. However there came a period of reaction into relative mediocrity. I think I disappeared off the intellectual map for a number of years in my middle to late grammar school years, but because my parents retained their earlier hopes they insisted I continue along previous lines. I was not a good science student. I passed everything but not with high grades. At the same time I had begun to write and, because I had time to spare, I was sent to do Art again. Suddenly, and completely unexpectedly, I found I was good at painting and drawing. I had dropped Art as a school subject when I was fourteen and was considered clumsy at that stage. From the first time I read a poem seriously, however, I knew I wanted to be a poet and now I had the opportunity of being an artist as well. My parents were not happy about it, but I went to art college and studied Fine

Art. While studying I met my wife, Clarissa, also a painter (and still practising as one now), fell in love and underwent a deep religious experience of a specifically Christian kind. I was married and baptised (by full immersion) in the same year. This was the time I came across Blake. I had also come to admire the early Chagall (I must emphasise that it was only the early Chagall, the later works I considered even then somewhat woolly and sentimental). I knew nothing of Alasdair Gray.

My poetry at the time was not as it appeared in my first books later. It was more directly ‘visionary’ and absorbed elements of Blake, Rimbaud and was beginning to absorb Eliot too. The poems were not dystopic: they tended towards the spectacular. Dead bodies leaked diamonds, and so forth. The love poems (I have written these from the very beginning) were, I think, highly sexual but, as you remark, tender at the same time. This did not make for conventional Christianity in the English tradition, and I distrusted the few places where it might have fitted – with the tradition of Eric Gill and David Jones for instance.

I never made a conscious effort to be visual, nor at that stage, to be narrative either. I think the poems were probably over-active, overexcited. The darker side of Blake disturbed me. It was a different matter later. The change came in the mid-seventies, shortly after my mother’s death, as I have written elsewhere. What I was most concerned to avoid was that which struck me as untrue. I had begun to write because I wanted to tell the truth as I saw it: complex, contradictory, difficult, beautiful and disturbing. That was my first and most important perception. I had not begun to articulate the darker places of the world at that stage in my early twenties, perhaps because I didn’t know how to, and because I believed that personal love might be an adequate defence. Of course only half of me believed that. Perhaps I could return to the question of dystopia later. The ‘gentleness’ seems to be a constant quality, though, as you have seen, there are savage violences in the poems, and, occasionally, in the voice of the poems too.

**LV.** A Desperado is, more often than not, displaced. You are twice displaced: from Hungary to England, from painting to poetry. Is displacement a source of tension or a good starting point for poetry, in your case? Is it a reason for tension? I have in mind writers like Ishiguro, Rushdie, Lessing, Ondaatje. To them, displacement is a fertile wound, it keeps bleeding into fiction. Your displacement is so much more discreet. Would you say you feel you have anything in common with other displaced writers?

**GS.** This is a very difficult question to answer from the inside. I have no doubt that displacement is a central issue in my poems, even those that are not directly concerned with the theme. I should perhaps feel more in common with Ishiguro, Rushdie and the others you mention, than I do. I love the first two Ishiguro books, and am fascinated by the last one. I think the work of W.G. Sebald is in some way close to mine. (One of the two long poems in my next books is dedicated to Sebald). I am uncomfortable about groupings such as the one you suggest while appreciating that such

groupings are rational steps. I have never actually TRIED to be a foreign writer. I wanted to be an English one. The success might lie in the failure.

**LV.** Your poetry relies on sensibility and silence. You see and write, although, if you decided to state plainly what you felt, the storm would be devastating. But you do not really confess. You invoke kindred spirits (family and readers). Desperadoes usually ignore confession. They prefer a no man's land, wherefrom they manipulate the reader unseen. You manipulate your reader by making him travel in your imagination. Your poetry is a magic carpet flying over the earth, all earth, even though some call it just Europe. I think you have the Renaissance calling of the universal man (maybe this is one reason why you both paint and write). Do you feel richer than a poet born in the land he is writing about, knowing and writing about no other space?

**GS.** I often envy the poet working in the place where he is born. Gabriel Fitzmaurice, to whom the first of the three 'Hungarian Sonnets' is dedicated, is precisely that. A lovely man, he has certain advantages, the most important of which is his ability to resonate with the music of time and place, in his case a small village in County Kerry, Ireland. I think of this as the kind of place where song is born. My disadvantage is that I cannot write the songs of the tribe. I feel excluded from it. Nevertheless I feel I know something the tribe can only guess at, which is to my advantage. At the same time it strikes me as unfitting and even dishonest to proclaim this 'advantage' as it is due to no virtue of mine. Hence the silence. Hence too the invoking of kindred spirits. The kindred spirits are as disorientated as I am – deep down – by life, and find it as dreamlike. I can only hope that these spirits have a small residence in the minds of those more deeply rooted, such as Gabriel. As to the magic carpet my imagination is naturally wild and erratic. That is how it appeared in my first poems long before publication. The craft of the poetry is a way of exercising some control over them and, at the same time, showing some courtesy to the tribes I must deal. Form is, I believe, a kind of courtesy.

**LV.** Your poetry swims in many people's works, faint echoes of T.S. Eliot, Auden, Wordsworth, Peter Porter and so many others. What are your literary roots and who, do you think, influenced your poetry?

**GS.** My first great literary experience was in fact Eliot. I had read many other poets before him but in *The Waste Land* I found a landscape that corresponded to a certain element of my own life. More than Wordsworth, Coleridge has moved me deeply. It may be the Germanic element in Coleridge, whose best poems remind me, perhaps irrationally, of fairy tales and the Brothers Grimm. I loved the late more obscure romantics, such as Beddoes and Ransom (John Crowe, the American) because of their mannerly strangeness. I loved these more than the poets of reason. I love the grotesque in Pope and Swift and Rochester. I must somehow reconcile this with the tender religious feeling of Herbert. Auden is a great hero of mine because of his gift of phrase and his lyric gift, not so much because of his Goethean wisdom. For the

same reason I admired Brodsky and Hecht and Fenton in England. They understood darkness and could counter it with wit. They were also Europeans, and I am, I think, above all, a European. All that is good and all that is evil reside for me in the heart of Europe. Intellectually I understand there may be greater saintliness and greater viciousness in Africa or South America but none of that strikes as close to my heart as Europe.

**LV.** Your poems narrate a story of solitary loss. The reader travels across images, and after a while he realizes the images are islands which make sense, cohere into a soul. *The Slant Door* claims that 'the greater power lies in quiet.' You are indeed, a quiet poet, whose poetic loneliness forces a new experience on the reader, that of isolated reading, a reading experience in which even the poet steps aside, offering incidents and sights, expecting a totally independent reaction. You manipulate your readers into feeling independent when they are not. This is a very complicated dance. Are you aware of your dissimulated technique of persuasion? Is it an instinct or an aesthetic strategy?

**GS.** I think you are absolutely right and it frightens me. I think that my 'self', in so far as I can conceive its existence, is a detached, hovering thing. I am acutely aware that this is not the impression I make in person, but I think the person I have become – the interface – is a learned process. Being so uncertain of my own essence I feel some diffidence about offering that person as a subject. I am sceptical about myself. I suspect it may be very important for me to remain sceptical. Thus, I can make general observations about myself or about the persona that appears in the poem, but I must treat these generalisations with a certain disdain. The cavalier phrasemaker – like Porter, like Auden, like Pope – keeps an eye on the romantic nightmarish and the sentimental lover. That is as far as I am aware of what you call my 'dissimulated technique of persuasion'. But this awareness does not consciously influence the process of composition. Such checks and balances operate under semi-conscious conditions only, and it would be impossible to write otherwise.

**LV.** *Background Noises* prompts the reader to do a very un-Desperado thing: 'Hold off the intelligence and listen.' Irony is not a refuge for you. Your poems are compassionate. Your lyricism is considerate. Even your pain is veiled by a screen of decency. This is remarkable, considering the indecent rage of Desperado poets. Your fists are clenched, but the images you draw with them are ethereal. How do you combine the intensity of experience with the mildness of your poetic diction? Is it your nature to be soft, or do you want your readers to feel free from the poet's turmoil, and just enjoy the sights?

**GS.** In view of the above you might see why I want to hold off the intelligence. I think the intelligence is too awkward an engine to probe the areas that seem important to me. And so is the ego that might fuel me with indecent rage. I am not the only person in the world, and the doubts I have about my own person are only valid for me. I cannot assume that the subjectivity of others is as ethereal as mine is. In any case I like the tangible world. Like most poets I am a

sensualist of sorts. My 'consideration', and I would regard it as a compliment to be considered considerate, arises, if it exists, from childhood with a sick, passionate, often irrational but heroic mother. 'Whatever you feel cannot compare with what she has undergone and continues to undergo'. One's own feelings enter a kind of anaesthesia, which is very much like dreaming. As a young poet I was a soft poet who sometimes wrote hard, I think I am perhaps a harder person now who can afford to write a little – but only a little – softer. Relatively few of my critics / reviewers comment on my 'tender' feelings, indeed there are some who cannot locate my feelings at all. They think I write at a peculiar distance. I suspect they are right. But that is no reason why those around me should be confronted by that distance. That is what they don't understand. I don't feel I am, nor intend to be, a comforting POET, but as a man I cannot see why I should not strive to be so. Easy comfort in art is no comfort at all.

**LV.** There is an air of life-after-death in your poems. *The Shared Bath* mentions the 'intimacy of skulls.' Your write secretive verse, and past death is your secret. As we read along, we discover traces of unbearable violence. I have often thought of Chagall while reading your verse. You have the same horror-struck dreaminess. The two should not go together, but you manage to melt them in the same pot, so the reader does not even realize that he is being initiated into nightmare. Your poetic manner is devious. Are you writing about direct experience (actually I know you are not), and, further, how do you make this horror you have never experienced on your own the stuff of such intimate emotions?

**GS.** 'Horror-struck dreaminess' is a wonderful phrase and I think you are very clever to have used it here. I think it is absolutely right. The world is beautiful and that is dreamy, but because it is dreamlike it is not to be trusted. There are terrors. Whether these are terrors of my imagination or of the world outside I do not know. I think I have been infected by terrors through my parents, but I am not terrorised by them. It may be that one of the key intimate poems relating to this question is 'Against Dullness' (p14 of *Short Wave*, p18 *Selected Poems*). In the poem my wife has just come in from the rain and has sat down in the armchair. I remember the occasion well. The discolouration and discomposure of her rain soaked coat and damp hair made me think for a second of the skeleton of the mother in Hitchcock's Psycho, but an instant later the overt gothic horror of the film image gave way to an unwilling apprehension of the given horror, the sheer ambivalence of the world. The last three lines of the poem are the most important, in that they hold true through everything I have written. The enormous pity of the world in which rain leaves such dark stains moves me more than anything. The dystopia you mention is always a possibility: the poems fear that it may be the true state of the world but are unwilling to assume so. Dystopia, as an idea, is too easy, too much of a gesture. I dislike consciously constructed dystopia for that reason. Dystopia as an apprehension is far more forceful and credible.

**LV.** Your love poetry is shy and yet bold. Is love an important topic with you? Do you think a poet should write some love poetry in his life, or is love to be shut out of verse? In good Desperado tradition, love is not your major issue. At

the same time, you smash it into splinters and sow it in every line. You seem to be a most affectionate being. Do you write with your sensibility, mind, eyes, memory?

**GS.** My three part 'collected poems' will have as its third part the collected poems on love, desire and art, which are, for me, part of a single pattern. The equation I automatically assume, which echoes something of Blake, says Desire is Fire and Energy; but Love is deeper and steadier. It demands virtues whereas desire demands chiefly energies. Life must embrace the tension between the two. By desire I mean primarily sexual desire, but also that deep desire for whatever is Other and alive as an idea. On this basis Death is perfectly alive as an idea. If Blake could maintain this tension in his life it might be possible for others. I saw how deeply my parents loved each other despite their difficulties and furies. Yet desire must keep its edge, and live on the excitement provided by the fear that accompanies it. I think if I failed to keep the tension up I would be poetically dead.

***LV.*** *The Photographer in Winter* quotes Orwell in its motto. Budapest is your dystopia and utopia at the same time. Memory is also both these things. You cleverly resort to indeterminacy in order to keep your distance from despair. A line states, 'What seems and is has never been less certain.' Your whole poetry slips into that statement. Your poetic mood is slippery like an eel, it will not strike roots in words. You stumble over colours and shapes, you choose the least obvious, offensive or aggressive words, and the result is initiation into disaster. Desperadoes are great lovers of displacement into dystopia. How would you describe your inner world and the way you choose into poetry? What is your aim? To warn, strike terror, soothe, entertain, or imprint your seal on the reader's soul forever?

**GS.** Budapest is the locus of uncertainty, its emblem. I love it and distrust it as much as I love and distrust language itself (see 'English Words', in *Selected Poems*). Budapest is an overt carrier of historical and personal meanings. The meanings are there in the way the statues emerge from the walls and the way the walls collapse. I think I say somewhere in *Bridge Passages* (it's in *The Flies*): 'What the wall thinks is my concern'. I don't know how I would describe my inner world. The poems do that. My aim? To make a world I can believe in. I want others to believe in it too, because, for all its horrors I suspect it may be a better, more comprehensive world than those we normally tend to offer each other. I certainly don't want to soothe the reader but I am not setting out deliberately to shock him or her. I want the reader to become more human, more humane. I want the reader to understand what the walls seem to be saying.

**LV.** Your personal history seems highly interesting, yet you never reveal it. You offer older photographs, black and white memories, in exchange. Do you deliberately avoid being personal? All Desperadoes do. You always find

'bridges' to cross the river of life into hell. How do you manage to deal with serenity with such experiences that, if put into direct words, would make anybody's hair stand on end?

**GS.** I do avoid being personal. I don't want to get in the way of the walls. I am really not important and that is the central paradox of the poems: we are vital yet we don't matter at all; death is terrible but it is the most natural thing in the world. These are very common sense paradoxes really. I don't talk about myself because I think I am as lucky as a man can be. I have an apprehension of the terrible which is unusual in the way it has developed, but I don't feel I am a victim of it. It is precisely because I am not a victim that I feel a certain responsibility to those who genuinely are. I have very little patience with the cult and cultivation of victimhood.

**LV.** In *The Courtyards* you write a few lines which sum up the mood of your whole poetry: 'As if the past could ever lose its teeth:/ As if the eye could swallow everything/ and leave the world in darkness.' The intensity of your sensibility drains the reader, and also regenerates him, gives him strength. I should describe you as a very vital poet. What is the source of this vitality? Your nature, your art, your having survived a hell so many fell into, your narrow escape from communism?

**GS.** I can only hope for vitality. I feel vitality but cannot ever be certain that I can convey it. I am far from being a shamanistic poet, or perhaps it is simply that I think it is bad luck to talk of powers when all you might have are desires, but that does not mean that I don't think poetry has a genuine healing function. It does, but not as therapy. The great healing act of poetry is to bridge the gap between language and what happens. That is its project. But it would take a monster, a fool, or an egomaniac to think that he or she was actually succeeding in healing the world or even to consider the healing of the world as the project of their verse. I am not only sceptical about my own altruistic motives but am as superstitious as any other real poet about such things. My tutor at Leeds was a marvelous poet called Martin Bell. He once told me he could cast a curse on someone and bowed three times each night to the moon. I don't think he was in the least foolish. Even answering all your questions may be flirting with bad luck.

**LV.** *The Child I Never Was* states, 'The child I never was makes poetry.' You do look at the world with the tolerance of a helpless child. You do not expect your reader to explore your text, the same as you do not mean to explore innovation as a full time activity. You are not mainly interested in technicalities. What I think your really are after is to secure a tender surrender to your poetry. The reader must use his intuition. Eliot used to say that poetry could communicate before it was understood. You are past him, you are a Desperado, which means you are keen on making yourself understood. Clarity is a prerequisite with you, but depth is another matter. Would you contradict me if I stated that you

never write as a child, but as a very shrewd painter? That you are very much aware of your art? That you mix literature (poetry and fiction), painting, photography, meaning to get thereby a unique species?

**GS.** Yes, you are right, there is a helpless tolerant child there, and I do hope to secure a tender surrender. That, I think, is the Eros of poetry. And of course there is a perfectly shrewd adult individual watching the helpless tolerant child. I would be nothing better than a con-man, a bare faced liar, if I pretended to be nothing but a helpless tolerant child. Do you know the Sindbad stories of Gyula Krudy? I translated them into English. Sindbad the hero is a three hundred year old amorist. He is both a child who wants to please his mother and an ironic old ghost who revisits his seductions. I am not quite a ghost yet and I know I am an adult male and father of two grown up children. In this respect I understand pretty well what I am. Clarity is precious, but depths – it is their nature – are murky. I have no conscious project to create a single art out of literature and the things my own literature refers to. The other arts are illuminating. I want the clarity to go as far down as it possibly can, and the other arts help.

**LV.** Your mother was born in Cluj, I think. Since I live in Romania, I have a predictable question: After visiting Romania, probably after meeting your one Romanian relative, how do you feel about it as a country, a space of the past and of the present?

**GS.** When I first visited Romania in 1993, it was a very dark and disorientating experience. I was shocked by the conditions people lived in, by their fear and demoralisation, by the sheer physical chaos. It was what I sometimes feared my own mind could become. I wanted to get out. The poem *Transylvana* was the result. Its horrors are part-comical part-lyrical. When I revisited in 1997 on a British Council tour and attended the conference at Oradea, conditions had improved somewhat. As often happens with poets' imaginations, place and person overlap. *Romanian Brown* is a mixture of landscape, politics and enchantment. It was an echo of some chaos in myself, therefore exciting. I very much liked many of the people that I met on my tour. Romania's material state, its history and its current position are only relatively familiar to me, but I have read a number of Romanian poets: Tartler, Dinescu, Crasnaru, Sorescu, Nina Cassian and Denisa Comanescu, among others, and my sense of Romania is coloured by them. Whether this is a valid sense of place or not I cannot tell, but it seems potent.

**LV.** You talk about 'the accident of being who one is.' You have crossed the iron curtain and were brought up in England. Which is not always the same as saying you are an Englishman. How well have you adapted to your country of adoption? You are haunted by a past 'which remains forever another place.' Your poetry strives back to Budapest and the lost family. Where exactly do you belong, where do you feel at home?

**GS.** I don’t know the answer to this one. I am trying to answer it for my own sake. The next book is an attempt to do so. I feel the typical patriotism of the immigrant. I am fiercely defensive of England. At the same time I recognise I am not of it nor will ever entirely be so. I want to love the people and the land and the history and the culture and I am partially successful in this. At the same time there is much I do not like and feel limited by. I regret its caution, its empiricism, its insularity, its class system, its leadenness, its general middle greyness. But it is also the country of eccentrics, of mad heroic projects, of extraordinary inventions, or remarkable tolerance. And it offered and continues to offer safe harbour and stability to many, including myself. My good friend, the Hungarian poet Ottó Orbán, drew a little picture for me by way of dedication to one of his books. He showed a cloud between England and Hungary, with an arrow saying ‘You’. Maybe. In the last section of the biggest single poem of the next book (25 poems in 5 sections, all in terza rima) England is destroyed by five apocalypses. I myself don’t know what to make of this, but I wrote it and, I think, wrote it as well as I have ever written anything, so it must mean something to me.

**LV.** Just like Chagall, even though you never write about it very explicitly, the tragedy of the wandering Jew is the central theme of your sensibility (if I am not wrong). As a line says, ‘The crematorium waits, the oven burns.’ Your horror goes beyond the pogroms in Chagall. If the Russian painter was flying above a nightmarish village, you have a whole ‘holocaust’ to hover above, and the task is exhausting. So you conclude by feeling ‘The horrible familiar stench/ Of loss.’ A true Desperado, you assume and intellectualize history. But now, in an interview, not in poetic language, how do you feel about this particular history, which has darkened the life of your family, even yours, your memories at least? How come your poetry never flares against this injustice, just registers it in whispers?

**GS.** ‘Poetry makes nothing happen’ wrote Auden. ‘It is a way of happening. A mouth.’ This may not always be true but sometimes I think it is right for it to be a way of happening and a mouth. It is quite certain that the lives of people of my parents’ generation and location were lived in conditions of insecurity, murder, paranoia and genocide. The darknesses of my life are less definable than theirs. The Holocaust’s shadow does not lie directly across my face as it did on theirs. It does not look so well, so right, on me. If I want to fight against injustice I feel I should do so through actions. My generation is capable of action. But action is ambivalent and dangerous and I feel it is therefore very important to talk in a clear level tone. I hate being swept away on potentially false emotions, even when generated by myself. I have an apprehension of disaster. I have not deserved a medal for surviving it.

**LV.** In *A Greek Musée*, you describe life as a ‘footnote/ to unwritten literature.’ It makes me think poetry is vital to you. The reading experience you prepare is far more important to you than your own life, which is to be used as a footnote, not as a major code. Your poetry is and yet is not at all autobiographical. You decant real life into words, for the benefit of those who read you. What is your image of your ideal reader?

**GS.** Yes, poetry is vital to me. I equate it with truth and I feel truth to be wonderfully and dangerously complex. I feel uncomfortable talking about my own life in literary terms. It seems I have been to certain places and seen certain things, but the meaning of these things is complex. My ideal reader is someone capable of sensing the complexity – the paradox of the preciousness yet disposability – of what happens and to whom it happens. I would like the poetry to heighten his or her sense of their unique tiny position in the world. To turn my life into an anecdote would be to lie about it.

**LV.** *English Words* states, 'I cannot trust words now.' You are everywhere mistrustful of words, pushing meaning into image, incident, history. The word is replaced by understatement. What is your reaction when critics (and interviewers) probe your texts in hopes of finding something intelligent to say? Are you angry? What is the ideal critic like, in your expectations?

**GS.** All I expect of my critics is intelligence and a careful ear. Then they can say what they like. I say this without any flattery but you seem to me amongst the most intelligent and understanding of my critics. I trust you to respond in whatever way suits you best. I am not the keeper of a secret that others must solve. I am not a setter of crossword puzzles. I don't know the answers myself. I don't even believe there are firm answers to the questions people ask of literature or writers. There are only more or less convincing readings, including the writer's own. Nor can we always be sure why we find one reading more convincing than another. I suppose it would help if the critic felt something of the gentleness with which I would actually like to treat the world. It is not that the world is treated gently in my poems, it is simply that the desire to treat it gently matters. It has had a pretty rough time. There are human creatures living in the big, rather dark, but mannerly structures of my poems: those structures are supposed to represent the structures of a possible real world.

**LV.** In *Transylvana* you write, 'The dead/ drive dangerously among the living.' Your poetry is such a race, a risky race (you state somewhere you love taking risks), a challenge to text-diggers. The result is, in *Soil*, that home 'is nowhere to be found.' You are fifty-two now. Between displacement (in childhood) and your permanent dystopic memories, have you at last reached the feeling that you belong, and that your world is acceptable? How would you describe yourself as a poet today, in English literature, in England as a space, among (the) other Desperado writers in England?

**GS.** The risks I take don't look that much like risks at first sight. I am not an

avant-gardist (I even think it somewhat too safe being an avant-gardist). I am polite, even courteous in my writing. There is, perhaps, an air of diffidence. The risks are to do with speaking quietly and walking in big buildings. I sometimes think of my poems as buildings, in fact of the whole project as a building (a tenement block perhaps) somewhat to the side of the main stream of English verse. I don't fit most of the available categories, but I don't seem to make a fuss about it, so people hardly notice I don't fit. I don't speak FOR a specific group or tribe so am not, as one friend at the BBC once told me, USEFUL. I am, therefore, a semi-derelict building round a bend of the river. I think I am resigned to this. I think the problem with us Desperadoes, to adopt your term, is that we constitute too diverse a landscape for now. It might be – and I must live in that hope – that the landscape we make might later appear more substantial in its weirdness, and that someone sometime might make a proper city of it. In the meantime I am fortunate to be able to build anything at all, and even more fortunate that it is at least visible from the river. Nobody has ever suggested that I can't build.

**LV.** Your poetry is a 'craft' which your have learnt, as you say. Your music is discreet and haunting. You write sonnets, you do not abuse rhyme, on the contrary, it seems to me you do everything in your power to conceal it. Yet you feel you have to use it, to continue the craft. The poetic tradition means something to you. The blend of tradition and Desperado leads to a chameleonic text, which requires subtle readers. Subtlety is one of the major features of your poetry. Subtlety is *the* major Desperado mood. Whatever they do, they want to do it unnoticed. You *are* a concealed, devious, highly resourceful Desperado. At the end of this interview, would you flatly reject this label, maybe hesitantly accept it or suggest another?

**GS.** If that is what a Desperado is then I accept the title. I am puzzled however as to how one should reconcile the deviousness with the clarity. Or is that just more deviousness?

February 10, 2001

## John Whitworth, *I would hate to write anything that people think they* ought *to read rather than want to read*

Interview with **JOHN WHITWORTH** (born 1945), British poet

**LIDIA VIANU:** One Desperado feature, which you perfectly illustrate, is the mastery of form, exhausted and then made an object of derision. You can write using any fixed form anyone may name, I think, but your secret is in your rhymes, which most often than not, run against the grain. A traditional rhyme falls like the dead sound of a bell, stressing meaning, making it irreversible. Your rhymes are dynamite to sense. A Desperado rhyme, if I may call it that, is, to my mind, what you do. You wink at the reader and whisper, Forget meaning, come and play with my half words, suffixes, auxiliaries and prepositions. A rhyme, you teach your readers, does not have to be so much in earnest. A rhyme should constantly surprise and shock. I will soon mention some startling rhymes, which extend the possibilities of Desperado poetry far beyond the so far accepted idea of lyricism. Right now the question is: Do you overturn lyricism deliberately? Are you a deliberate reformer of rhyme? Did you begin doing that out of instinct or out of the need to apply irony to a dying (because boring) literary genre?

**JOHN WHITWORTH:** Long questions require long answers. I don’t think the word ‘deliberately’ is right at all. I didn’t do anything deliberately. I didn’t even become a poet deliberately. It just happened. I had better start with how I became a poet in the first place. I didn’t do it very early. I didn’t lisp in numbers much or really at all. If I wanted to be a writer at all at the age of, say, ten or eleven, rather than a professional cricketer, I wanted to write like PG Wodehouse – funny things. And I was living in Edinburgh – an English boy in Scotland, not an altogether comfortable thing to be. To be a poet and English as well, amongst these tough, aggressive Scots, that would not have done at all. It was better to be clever. Clever is always OK in Scotland though not in England then or now, where my children use the contemptuous word ‘boff’ (equals boffin equals mad scientist) to describe clever people. And of course it was better to be funny – as you probably know the British forgive funny people anything. There is a poem of mine in ‘Landscape with Small Humans’ (my favorite book), which takes some of this up – ‘Having the Nose for It’. But the poem (for dramatic reasons) makes me more consciously a poet than I ever was. I wanted to be an actor (that’s after wanting to play cricket for England). I wanted to show off. I loved poetry privately though and never found it boring. And I was as impressed by difficulty (from Donne to Eliot) as clever adolescents tend to be. Incidentally, I was terribly well taught in Scotland, better probably than I would have been in England. I think the irony is an English thing. We hide behind it.

I've never been one for showing (parading) my feelings. There was a girl I was deeply in love with when I was seventeen, eighteen, nineteen… we laughed and joked and I yearned for her in her badminton things – 'Jenny Jeffery' is the poem, much influenced by Browning. I think the acrobatic rhymes were something I knew I could do, whereas being deep like Yeats and Eliot or visionary like Dylan Thomas, that might well be beyond me.

**LV.** Unlike most Desperado poets, who confine their art to the irony of their use of language, which encodes emotion so well that it sometimes gets away undiscovered, you are a tender Desperado. I have come across tender Desperado novelists (to name only Peter Ackroyd and Graham Swift), but I must confess that in poetry, particularly male poetry (why do you, seemingly ironically, say women write light verse?), tenderness is an unfought battle. I think the world of your poetry precisely because you had the courage to confront lyricism where it used to be stronger – sentiment. You do not object so much to lyricism, as to its pampering use of words so far. You belong to a generation which rejects ready-made phrases and ready-made rhyme. You devise a kind of do-it-yourself (your word) lyricism, and your ingenuity is irresistible. Do you view your poetry as tender? Do you mean to sympathize while shocking or to shock without sympathy? Do you expect a loving or loveless reader?

**JW.** Certainly I had the wish to shock, but only to get attention. Being physically timid, I suppose I used my tongue as a weapon and let it run away with me rather, *saying* things that got me into hot water without quite meaning to. As for tenderness, I discovered that (in my life) when I escaped the Scots 'hard man' ethos and went to Oxford University – the best thing I got from there. Indeed it would be the best thing one could get, don't you think? Certainly I mean to be tender – what's the use of poetry without tenderness? And who would want a loveless reader? On the other hand one doesn't want to be slopping it all over the place, does one? There is room for the English stiff upper lip and the Scots savagery (they, we, are a savage lot) as a kind of sauce to the tenderness.

**LV**. Your first volume, with a significant Desperado title, I think – *Unhistorical Fragments* – (a Desperado usually escapes from history, from any form of tradition, and struggles to be as dissimilar as possible from everybody else, his own previous works included), is a tender inventory of most of your themes: 'The furtive unicorns of lust', 'The illimitable misery/ Of being young', 'I hate Monday mornings', and, last but not least, '*Whitworth, what the hell do you think you are doing?'* Again, unlike your Desperado contemporaries, the biographical narrative is obvious in your poems, and becomes food for the reader's thought. Your *Landscape with Small Humans* gratifies the curiosity of all those who want to peep at your soul. Desperado novels, being denied love interest and a traditional plot, take refuge in the diary and the autobiographical (Lessing, among others). Desperado feminine poetry dives into the personal, almost the private and the forbidden. Desperado male poetry (this is becoming rather sexist, but true in my reading experience so far) escapes into feats of language, of style. You do both: you eat your cake and have it, so to say. You feel and say.

You are unashamed of making your life public, and you spice it with an unparallelled gift of rhyme. Is a volume of poetry expected to be a kind of diary of the poet? Would you agree that the Desperado Diary is a new genre, which only the brave can use?

**JW.** I don't see myself as brave *in any way* alas, for I admire courage, as who does not. I can always deny anything that seems autobiographical and say I made it up – sometimes I did make it up. I am kicking round the idea of writing an autobiography which mingles truth and fiction (meaning lies which are true). Indeed I have already written quite a bit of it. It's inside the computer I'm writing this on now. I hate the idea of Confessions though (they seem so self-important) and tend to agree with Norman MacCaig: I am in no way an unusual man, so talking about myself is talking about everybody. Yes, I also have noticed that male poets, being men, like showing off, in language as in other non-poetic things (getting into drunken fights, stealing cars and so forth) more than female poets. It's surely not sexist (yet) to say that men and women are different.

**LV**. It is quite difficult for the reader to find your literary masters and peers. You mock at all poets, whether near and dear or repulsive and remote. I could mention Eliot, Yeats, cummings (with his 'lower case'), Larkin, Hughes. There are many more. Your *From the Sonnet History of Modern Poetry* is a brilliant, intensely enjoyable volume that challenges irony in the reader. Without a sense of humour it is a pity to tackle your poems. Talking seriously (this interview is getting too intellectual for such emotionally gratifying poems), who is your friend and who your foe (if any)? Who has influenced you? Whom do you side with among your contemporaries?

**JW.** Well, I've been corralled into something called 'School of Ewart', along with Peter Reading and Wendy Cope and others, and since I was stuck there by the GREATEST (no irony) poet of my lifetime, Philip Larkin, I must be content with that. I am. Gavin Ewart's poetry is a joy to me, and an inspiration but, to be honest I don't think he is better than me. Larkin is better. Auden is better. Les Murray is better, or at least he can do things I can't. Betjeman is an influence and I much admire his skill and his ability to do something different. I like Wendy Cope, Peter Reading, Sophie Hannah, Kit Wright (Kit above all) and I read all their books, but I don't (honestly) think they are better either — though more successful here in some cases – just different. I have (honestly) quite a high opinion of my work, an opinion not (yet) shared by the English poetry establishment alas. But Les (Murray) thinks I'm good, and Gavin thought so, and the Peters Reading and Porter and Anthony Thwaite and a good friend of mine (a poet too) called Simon Rae, so I don't know what I am grumbling about.

**LV**. As a short sequel to the previous question: I noticed two poems, in two volumes, about Seamus Heaney. Is he a friend or the opposite? You do not write in his manner. If you could choose, would you?

**JW.** Seamus Heaney (whom I have never met) knows how to write. Some of his poems are perfect. But he is not an influence. He is there because he is Number One now, just as Eliot was Number One in my childhood and youth. Does he deserve to be? No-one deserves to be Number One. Poetry is not a competition. Nevertheless…

**LV**. A poem mentions 'committing poetry'. You commit poems just as other people commit adultery: you seduce words. Every word becomes your mistress and is pushed into bewildering rhymes. A line says, 'Love, luv? There's too much/ talk of love.' You hint at feelings, but do not cross the border, unless it is with a grin and a need to argue. No idylls in your poems (but plenty of tenderness, as I have said). Debunking love is typical for Desperadoes, yet no one wants to admit to the trick/ arrogance (or whatever the name). Most poets have accused me of misreading their lines, which are so full of emotions I fail to see. I do see emotion with you, but I also see your defiance of commiseration. Would you be prepared to accept the idea that your poetry reinvents sensibility, rewrites the very idea of feeling? In a language totally different from Dickinson, Eliot, Larkin & Co?

**JW.** I don't know if it's as different from Larkin as all that. When I first started writing seriously, in my twenties, he did seem to me the pinnacle of poetic art in the later part of the twentieth century – he still does. I once sent some poems to a magazine and the editor wrote me a rather acid note saying (roughly) that I was just recycling Larkin's tricks – he obviously hadn't noticed Betjeman's. I thought – damn, he's found me out. So I reckoned I'd better do something different and encouraged the unLarkin-like bits, the jokes (though Larkin certainly has jokes), the optimism, the showing-off with technique and the particular brand of sentimentality (tenderness if you like). Robert Browning was the poet who showed me how to do a lot of this; I didn't expect any editors to say I was recycling Browning's tricks; they probably wouldn't know anyway. I do agree that one has to be different or why bother. I don't know anybody writing now who writes like me, not *really* like me. That used to worry me (uniqueness is worrying – perhaps you're mad) but it doesn't now. I suppose I realise that, in spite of what I said to MacCaig, I am odd, though (really. really) I don't try to be. All poets are odd. It's an odd thing to be doing. Something that seems to describe me to myself is a remark of the novelist Peter de Vries, or at least a remark in a novel by Peter de Vries – 'deep down you're shallow'. I think that's me. And there's that American thing (great people Americans) 'It looks like a duck. It walks like a duck. It quacks like a duck. It's a duck.' Things often are just as they appear. Pretty girls are nicer than ugly girls. Children are amazing. You are transfigured by love. Proverbs are true. God is dead. (Nietzsche) Nietzsche is dead. (God) My existence is terrible. Sometimes I can't see how I'll get out of it alive (WC Fields). Reinventing sensibility? Yes, I'll buy that, though it wasn't a conscious programme – it just happened that way.

**LV**. I have found one typical rhyme for you (*Are You Dancing? No, It's Just the Way I'm Standing)*: 'neat meat in flaccid chops, em-/ braced in haste to see if she drops 'em...' You invent the rhyme with a sense of humour. Many other poets try unusual, shocking rhymes (Peter Porter, Ian Duhig, Sean O'Brien, to name just very few), and they all debunk rhyme. You go a step farther: you re-bunk it, if I can say that in English. You load your deliberately debunked/ disillusioned rhymes with a cargo of hopeful, expectant soul. Your sensibility is always in ambush for words and for readers who can find the magic path. Unlike many Desperadoes, you do have a magic path. Your poetry does lead to a warm kernel of love and the reader is filled with joy. It would be naive to ask if that is your aim (who would say no to that?), but I can find another way of putting it: What do you value more, words or emotions? Could you do without verbal fireworks? Could you do without emotions, if the lines were unbelievably clever verbally?

**JW.** Oh I do hope I have a magic path, I do hope so. Nobody can do without emotions. Lewis Carroll's poetry (he's another influence) is crammed with emotions. I am an emotional person and some poems (not my own) make me pretty well burst into tears. Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill', for instance, or Richard Burton reading poetry on tape, Prospero's 'Our revels now are ended', something by Hopkins. But you can't have poetry without words, can you? I do think some poetry nowadays is a desiccated, bloodless thing; the real stuff *must* appeal directly to the emotions. But you can't do that without words and you do have to be good at using them. I'm very impressed by *skill*. Wallace Stevens, say, is very skilful, and I can really relate to that as they say nowadays. Whereas, say, the Beat poets are just not interesting enough. I've just reread Carol Ann Duffy's sonnet 'Prayer'

Pray for us now. Grade 1 piano scales
console the lodger looking out across
a Midlands town. Then dusk, and someone calls
a child's name as though they named their loss.

– now that's the sort of stuff we need!

**LV**. Your poetry is a volcano of rhyming words and half-words, suffixes, last and first letters (one example: the rhyming of 'visit/ is it/ hesit-, followed in the next line by
-ance). It also is a volcano of healthy sexuality. The sound track is great. The sense is equally satisfying. I wonder, is mockery replacing lyricism? You create poetry while you are actually mocking at its conventions. You use old patterns and deprive them of meaning deliberately (or am I wrong?). You also create new, private patterns, which you endow with real, captivating life. In *Scribble Scribble* I find the following:

The poems are all failures, never
*Quite* what I meant. Too bloody clever,
Obsessed with technicalities,
Enamelled in self parodies,
Rhymes chiming pat, like that. Bah! Too
Easy, and finally, not true.

Are you happy with your poetry so far? If you were to start all over again, would you do it any differently?

**JW.** I wouldn't change it. I wouldn't re-edit it either, like Auden. I'm happy I've done it. But, as Larkin says, you don't choose to write the way you do. What I do is not the only way to write poems, or not maybe even the best way. But it's the only way for me. And I have to write a lot. Wendy Cope, who was a schoolteacher, and has that air sometimes (smarten up, John!) reckons I publish too much. She goes for the thin stream of pure gold, like Eliot or Larkin. But I think, what the hell? Write it all and publish what you can. It'll all be sorted out by time. No, I wouldn't do it differently, I don't see how I could. I think my next book and the next after that will be new and exciting – or exciting for me. You should be getting it from Harry Chambers pretty soon – *The Whitworth Gun*. I hope it goes off to good effect.

**LV**. Having reached this far, it is high time for my readers to know you, the man behind the poet mask. You were born in 1945 in India. What more can you confess about yourself? What have you studied, what do you do for a living, whom do you read, what is your family life (you have two daughters), in a word, who is John Whitworth the man, not necessarily the poet?

**JW.** Ah, now you can have a really long answer. I shall work on this one. You've got my childhood already in the poems. After school in Edinburgh I went to Oxford, which was something I'd never expected to do – not nearly clever enough – and did two degrees there. In fact it wasn't until *six years* after leaving school that I actually had to get a job. I tried for university ones but my first degree was only second class so I ended up teaching foreigners English. I went on doing that from 1969 to 1982 when the London outfit I worked for went bankrupt. I was married by then but we were TINAs (two incomes, no children) . Then I was out of work and we had one, then two children. Since Doreen, my wife, had a university job which paid better than anything I was likely to get, I became a sort of househusband working part time for pin money (that's not much money) a year. In other words I haven't had a proper job since 1982 – for twenty years! Bringing up the girls was great, the best thing I can remember doing. It beats working except that you never have enough money. My wife, of course, got the rotten end of the deal. She had to work full time and also do all

sorts of things at home because a woman is supposed to. I taught creative writing, did the poet thing and swanned around with the kids at swimming pools and MacDonalds and the seaside. And of course everyone thought it was marvellous, because I was a man and could change a nappy, cook a dinner and so forth. Now Doreen's retired and I'm supposed to make more money but it isn't happening, or it isn't happening enough.

**LV**. *Lovely Day for a Wedding* is a mixture in the open between poetry and narrative. You like telling stories, or simply telling jokes in your verse, but this time the story is longer and has suspense and an ending. It is a typical Desperado story, mocking at love (shy of intense emotion, therefore putting it down or aside), ending in a common, everyday, uneventful way. It is in fact a deconstruction of the narrative (I hate the method in criticism, but the creator is entitled to anything). All your volumes rely, in part at least, on narratives. Have you ever written fiction? If not, would you like to? Does it seem correct to you to say that any contemporary poet is a novelist in a nutshell? And that those who reject the narrative thread have to fall back on language alone, soon exhausting their medium?

**JW.** I hadn't thought about any contemporary poet being a novelist but there's undoubtedly something in it. I've been trying to be a novelist for years (to earn more money) and the story in LDFW started as an aborted novel. The novel form doesn't seem to suit me, though I've written some short stories (skewed autobiography – very skewed indeed) which I am happy with, which I think are good, but I don't know how I'll get them published. There's a kind of Tristram Shandy novel I could probably do – the lying autobiography I told you about could be that.

**LV**. In *Tennis and Sex and Death* I have found one poem which shows everything you are at once: warm, ironical, inventive, incredulous, mistrustful of words, in love with life. It is entitled *Birthday Present*, and here it is, for such readers as have not read you yet:

Now daughter, hear your father. He
Is wise. At least he ought to be:
No money, lots of books, a lit-
tle beard, you may be sure of it.
So heed the advice he offers you.
It is the best that he can do.

Too soon you'll go to school, and for
A dozen years and maybe more,
You must be educated – what

Is what and who is who. Do not
Believe them much, but all the same
Be courteous. They are not to blame.

Be speculative, dreamy, kind,
Impractical. Don’t speak your mind.
For your opinions, hold as few
As it seems reasonable to do.
Hold them but do not be afraid
To bury them when they are dead.

Don’t pick your friends with too much care,
But such as happen to be there.
Trust – if you must – a pretty face.
There lies disaster, not disgrace.
Love soon, love easily – the fact is,
Like most things love improves with practice.

Don’t *weigh* your conversation – talking
Should be as natural as walking
To take the Sunday morning air,
Not just because of getting there.
Watch trash on television. Read
Old books, not new. Do not succeed.

Try not to preach, try not to plan,
Try not take the *Guardian*.
Tolerate spiders, snakes and bats.
Be on the best of terms with cats.
Love gardens, garlic, sunset, lambs,
Church weddings, babies in their prams,

Fairgrounds and Mozart, Keats and... oh dear,

I said I wouldn't and there I go, dear.
It's only daddy rabbitting.
Same old daddy, same old thing.
My love, if you contrive to be
Just what you please, that pleases me.

And yes, p.s. do not believe in
Words. Their business is deceiving.

Most Desperado poets (all rejecting their being grouped together and scoffing at the name) deny emotional involvement in their lines. Some interviews even turn into lectures on how to/ and why to be uninvolved. Other answers scold the interviewer for not seeing emotion where it is obvious to the poet himself (not so obvious to the reader, though). Your poems are both easy-going and artful. You offer both emotion and play upon and with words. You verse is playful both in sensibility and style. Your being a Desperado relies on using all the tools a poet can wish for today. I am not sure my idea of a Desperado is clear as yet, but, so far, would you accept being called one?

**JW.** I'm glad you like that poem. I wrote it when Ellie, my elder daughter, was very small, and I stand by it now that she's eighteen, though I'm afraid she hasn't managed the thing about spiders and has a real phobia about them. How can you be *uninvolved* in your lines? I think poets who say that are posing. Why would you write poems at all except to touch the reader's heart by showing your own, as Hardy says? On the other hand I think you can/should go at it obliquely, you don't want your heart bleeding all over the page now do you? Art as a game appeals to me because I love games, like most men perhaps and unlike many women. I used to play cards a lot though I don't now, and I do lots of crosswords and stuff like that. In my classes I love inventing new writing games and often get a poem of my own out of one.

**LV**. I found an essential line for you in *I Too Dislike It*: 'I gave up being bored when I was thirty'. You never look bored, and I am sure one is never so with your poetry as company. Is your highly entertaining poetry deliberately or instinctively so? Do you aim at the reader's laughter? What else do you expect of your readers?

**JW.** I suppose that line was a sideswipe at a certain type of intellectual. I like people to laugh. I like them to be touched. I like them to buy the books, of course I do. I don't know that one should expect anything of one's readers at all, any more than an actor expects things of the audience – except that they turn up. It's up to us, isn't it, us the poets and the actors, to make it worthwhile for any audience we are lucky enough to get. I don't want my audience to read

poetry, anyone's, because it makes them feel better than, superior to, people who don't read it. That's the sort of stuff you get from the arts pages of Sunday papers.

**LV**. Parody is an essential tool with you. I find here and there parodies of many poets (that of Dickinson in *From the Sonnet History of Modern Poetry* can have anyone roar with laughter). You do not spare Eliot, Shakespeare, Yeats, Heaney and a lot more. What is the creator's mood in those poems? Do you despise, worship in disguise, or just use as pretext? What is the reader supposed to infer? That he must side with a rebel or with a conformer in disguise? I think you love gossip, and I wonder if you would admit to using it in your volume with parody-sonnets, if you would be willing to state that debunking great myths (from Shakespeare to Heaney) is healthy.

**JW.** I think debunking is probably too ambitious. I make jokes. Emily Dickinson is great and good. But also more than a bit absurd, like the rest of us. Tolstoy's debunking of King Lear (which made me very cross when I first read it – I saw Shakespeare as a personal friend of mine) didn't actually make any difference, did it? I think, though it sounds a bit affected to say so, that to me the great poets, like Yeats for instance, are still alive. And living people, people you know, are imperfect, just as one is oneself. Yeats was a bloody fool in many ways (and knew it himself) and his flirting with Irish fascism was the act of a bloody fool (an act which many an Irishman repeats today), but poets are not known for their worldly wisdom, are they? But *of course* Yeats was a great poet; that's taken as read. Pound, on the other hand, wasn't much good, and even Eliot wasn't much good after 1930 (a great man before that). According to me.

**LV**. *Landscape with Small Humans* ends with a shattering experience for your childhood, which was your mother's death. The pain is even deeper when seen, as you do, through the child's eyes. Your books, all together, make up a history of your inner life. They can be read as an autobiographical, indirect, lyrical narrative. This is another Desperado feature, which you illustrate. Do you ever find in poetry a friendly ear, a diary page? Or is it just the tense and intense hide-and-seek with chameleonic words?

**JW.** 'He tames it who fetters it in verse' says Donne. Obviously true. I couldn't get Jenny Jeffery in life but she's there in the poem and that's something. As for my mother's death, well of course I never got over it. You never get over anything, do you? My father married again, and my stepmother (a friend of my mother's) was a really nice person. I loved her very much and we always got on well except when I was getting at her in my irritating know-all adolescent leftist way for being a white Rhodesian – she knew Doris Lessing, incidentally, and didn't like her much. My stepmother was a treasure, but I still never got over my mother's death. Of course I didn't. I'm sure I would have been nicer if she hadn't died, nicer because happier. I wasn't at all happy between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, but then I suppose few boys are, and things got better after that. My marriage and my children made me happy and still do

– not all the time of course, that would be silly. But life's been quite good to me SO FAR. Wendy Cope said I'd never written a happy poem but I swear she's wrong about that. Indeed the one you quote seems happy to me.

**LV**. In years of reading contemporary poetry I have not come across a more touching, entertaining, satisfying (from all points of view) book than *The Complete Poetical Works of Phoebe Flood*. My twenty-year old daughter and my eighty-year-old mother enjoyed it just as much as me, which means it appeals to quite a number of generations. My first question, out of many about this book: Did you set out with Milne in mind? Because you have his tenderness, but totally different tools. The mood is the same, but you rely on parody where he just invented more reasons for emotion. Is Phoebe a love affair with or a gossip-pretext for poetry?

**JW.** I wrote Phoebe for my daughters. Ellie was about ten when I started and Katie was about ten when I finished. And for money of course – I found a publisher who would do a children's book. It was accepted before I'd finished it, before I'd written some of the best poems. I didn't set out with Milne in mind, but I admire Milne very much – his Winnie the Pooh books seem perfect, a kind of hymn to Englishness. And the illustrations are so good. I wanted Phoebe to have good illustrations and it does. I tried to avoid one of Milne's faults – the 'Christopher Robin is saying his prayers' sort of thing, appealing to adult slushiness over the heads of the children. Phoebe is FOR children – and a lot of the poems work for them. I tried them out on Ellie and Katie first and I read them in schools, so I think I know the best ones. Incidentally 'bored to the bone' is an invention of Ellie's. I just pinched the phrase and carried on. The first publisher of the poem wouldn't allow the word 'bum' so I had to write 'Hum!' instead. That one was actually the first children's poem that I wrote.

**LV**. I am reading Phoebe's poems with an alert eye to the hidden literary darts. One is on the very first page, and it makes this interview rather superfluous: 'I'm not going to tell you much more about myself because there's quite a lot of that in the poems.' And a few pages further on: 'I am an Artist and don't have to be clever, only Artistic'. Maybe I ought to get the drift and stop here, but this book has to be known. Everything in it is remarkable, from the shape of letters to illustrations and the wild sense of humour. In *Ten Quiz Questions* Phoebe announces: 'I think all poetry books should have a quiz. I suppose the answers ought to be at the back of the book'. After these put together, one question comes to mind: How much store do you set by literary criticism? What kind of critics do you value? I was just wondering if you can stand the scholarly type, hoping you would not (or maybe I should not have said that?).

**JW.** The jokes in Phoebe were (mostly) put in near the end. They don't make up a conscious programme. I have nothing against a scholarly type though I'm too intellectually lazy to be a scholar myself. Of course it depends on what kind of scholarly type. I have a friend from school called Richard Hogg who is now a Professor of English Language at

Manchester. I was up at a reading weekend with him and he suggested a reading of a poem by Paul Muldoon. It seemed to me
far-fetched (though I hadn't the faintest idea what the poem *was* about) and I asked him if he believed it. 'Oh no,' he said, 'but what's that got to do with it?' or words to that effect. I like clever people like Hogg or William Empson saying clever things. But don't you think that criticism has sometimes become a substitute for poetry – people do it *instead*. And they don't do it (as Johnson did) to elucidate but to obfuscate, to cut poetry off from the common reader. I'm against that. When I think about it, most of the critics of poetry I like are actually poets. Of course you are a critic I like, and I haven't read a word of your criticism yet. But (genuinely) I'd love to know why I was doing what I was doing and how I fit into a zeitgeist. In other words the whole Desperadoes thing fascinates me and I have no doubt it is true – whatever it is.

**LV**. *Letter To Seamus Heaney* makes me ask: what do you think is most valuable in a poem? Rhyme, emotion, cleverness, shocking use of language, clarity? How much do you rely on clarity (considering there is not one line in seven volumes that I have not been able to figure out, which is a record in contemporary poetry; most poets today are happy if they get away with rhyming and not much/ or against sense)?

**JW.** I like to be clear. It doesn't necessarily have to make sense but it ought to be clear like Lewis Carroll or Rimbaud's 'Mon triste coeur bave à la poupe' a poem I would like to translate. Do you see what I mean? The 'Fern Hill' that makes me weep is clear in the sense that I mean, though I know Thomas used to throw words at his poems like Jackson Pollock throwing paint at his canvasses. The poem in Phoebe called 'Mr Alucard' is one way I am going nowadays. I don't think poets should try too hard to be philosophers or psychologists or social historians or political historians or anything else. If that's what you want then you know where you can get it. Poets make poems, just as painters make paintings (or at least that's what they used to do).

**LV**. *Old MacDonald Had a Zoo* begins with the explanation: 'This one is a bit silly but everyone should be silly for ten minutes each day. Some are already of course.' Your loving and lovable sense of humour would win anyone. But you do more than just pretend you love and laugh. You warn. Unless poetry sticks to accessibility, it is lost. You do not tolerate humbugs (I will avoid names). But you do hate something, and that something is the aim of your parody in this apparently harmless, innocent little book. Could you define that something or, rather, would you?

**JW.** What do I hate? I hate that sort of superior cant the literary journalists use to show how clever they are and how stupid the rest of us are. A poem should be as simple *as it is possible for it to be* and as exact as its nature permits.

Sometimes things have to be woolly and impressionistic, sometimes there are huge cloudy symbols of a high romance, but often this is not so. I hate people who scoff at, say, this sort of thing:

But pleasures are like poppies spread:
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls on the river,
A moment white – then melts for ever,
Or like the Borealis race
That flit ere you can point their place,
Or like the rainbow's lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm.

That seems to me perfect, memorable from the first time I heard it at a Burns Supper, memorable for ever. You try to do that, thought in between you try other things as well. Or I do..

**LV**. *Do-it-yourself Insult Poem* (the do-it-yourself poem, used by you several times, is a brilliant explanation of what the Desperado poem is often all about) begins with: 'One of the reasons to write poems is TO GET YOUR OWN BACK.' I think you do get your own back because you write clearly and emotionally and endearingly and ironically where many fail to do the same. Bad poets rush where good poets fear to tread. Could you describe the kind of poem you would hate to write?

**JW.** I would hate to write Ezra Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' or indeed to want to write it because it is mean-spirited and *putting the reader down*. I would hate to write Hart Crane's 'The Bridge' because it is unintelligible and (therefore) *putting the reader down.* I would hate to write anything that people think they *ought* to read rather than want to read. I would hate to write anything (much) in free verse.

**LV**. In *Boring* Phoebe states, 'You can hear poetry every day if you just listen'.
Here is the whole poem (I just could not help quoting it in full):

I'm dead bored
bored to the bone.
Nobody likes me.

I’m all alone.
I’ll just go crawl
under a stone.

Hate my family,
got no friends.
I’ll sit here till
the Universe ends
Or I starve to death.
It all depends.

Then I’ll be dead,
dead and rotten,
Less than a blot that’s
been well blotten,
Less than a teddy bear
that’s been forgotten.

Then I’ll go to heaven which is
more than can be said
For certain persons
when they’re dead
They’ll go you-know-
where instead.

Then they’ll be sorry,
then they’ll be glum,
Sitting on a stove till
kingdom come.
They can all go
kiss my bum.

Bum’s a sort of swearing.

People shouldn’t swear.
I won’t go to heaven but
I don’t care.
I don’t care.
I don’t care.
I’ll sit here and swear.
                    So there!

Except that it’s boring!

Your poems could not be farther away from boring. If anything, you are that adjective which is the very opposite of boring. I do not name antonyms because, where your poetry is concerned, I would most certainly never be happy with a simple word. You are a poetic firework, the very image of the loving soul wrapped in rhyme. At the end of this trip across your work, what would you like readers to be left with? What should they be listening for in your ‘every day’ handling of the word? Because your rhymes and sense of humour are definitely far more than ‘worth a wit’...

**JW.** Good Heavens I feel almost embarrassed. Thank you for feeling as you do. What should my readers be left with? I hope they will feel happier for reading things of mine. I do think one of art’s functions is to cheer people up. Besides, it cheers me up to write my poems, I always feel better when I have written what seems to me a good one, so it’s only fair that the reader should be cheered up too.

2002

## Thomas Wright, *Criticism is not a science but rather a matter of preferences, passions and opinions*

Interview with **THOMAS WRIGHT** (born 1973), British critic

**LIDIA VIANU:** You strike me as a critic who worships clarity and would not sacrifice his style to contorted intricacies. You state that 'Borges was able to transform criticism into a kind of personal performance.' This sounds very much like what I call the Desperado critic's goal. Criticism is literature, not just a marginal explanation. On the other hand, it is not more important than the text, it cannot afford alienating the text. What is your position versus Deconstruction, Structuralism, and other –isms which confuse the reader, while claiming they clarify the text?

**THOMAS WRIGHT:** Let me say at the very beginning that I want this interview to be like a casual conversation in which both of us take an active role. It would be very boring for everyone concerned if you simply asked the questions and I then gave my long and rambling answers. And so, if you don't mind, I too would like to ask some questions as we go along. Also, please feel free to interrupt me when you think that I am becoming either incoherent or dull or both. Of course, everyone will know that this is a written 'e-mail interview' but still I would like to try to give it an oral flavour. I imagine that we are sitting in a café in Prague (this would be a good venue as it is about half-way between Bucharest and London), drinking coffee (with a dash of brandy) and chatting away.

Borges is my favorite critic, although I feel a bit guilty towards the ghost of Oscar Wilde for saying so. The extraordinary breadth of his culture makes his writing very stimulating; he also wrote with a real intellectual passion and an almost childlike sense of wonder. As a stylist too, he is absolutely magnificent, maybe incomparable: he combines the bookishness of pre-modern writers such as Erasmus or Chaucer with the humour of an eighteenth century wit. Most of all, he is an intensely idiosyncratic writer: there is a strong and, to me at least, a very engaging and seductive personality behind his work. And this is what I meant when I wrote that he was able to transform criticism into a kind of personal performance. In reading Borges' critical works you are presented with the spectacle of an extremely agile mind in the act of thinking: you are brought within the magic circle of his personality. I don't know if you have a similar figure in Romanian literature. If you do not then maybe someone should try to become the Romanian Borges.

I like Borges' criticism because it is so enjoyable to read (at heart I am a hedonist) and also because it is unashamedly subjective. It does not pretend to be 'scientific' in any way as its starting point is the existing individual (This phrase, by the way, was invented by Søren Kierkegaard, who is another of my favorite critics. Although he is

more famous for his other writings he wrote marvellous essays on Hans Anderson, Sardou and a novel called *Two Ages*). Well, as I was saying, when you read Borges you think of a very ordinary and a very real experience: that of someone sitting down (or maybe lying down) somewhere and reading a book. You think of a person meditating on what they have read, relating it to the other books in their mental library and to the world, or simply using their reading to dream. Borges's criticism is thus intimate and personal, like a form (a very unvulgar and unegotistical form) of autobiography. And so, although you might be able to discover within it certain intellectual habits or mental 'ticks', you could not ever reduce it to a set of objective principles or rules.

Now, more theoretical approaches to literature – and 'Structuralism' is a good example of one – seem to me to aspire to the status of science. I must say here, however, that I have never examined any of these 'isms' you speak of in any depth. At university I studied Modern History which in England is still based on empiricism and rhetoric (style, rather than theory, remains the essential). My knowledge of modern literary theory comes almost entirely from introductory studies such as Terry Eagleton's excellent work 'Literary Theory' and a few books by Roland Barthes.

Anyway, as far as I can remember from Eagleton's book, Structuralists believed that the 'structure' was the 'real content' of a story or myth and they sought to discover and elucidate universal narrative structures. Such an approach, apart from any of the other defects it may have, seems to me to remove criticism from the sphere of the individual and from the sphere of everyday life. The language used by Structuralists was, I seem to recall, as 'objective' and as esoteric as the language of mathematics: it did not assist the individual in the process of reading a book, nor could it be understood by non-Structuralists. Is this summary of Structuralism roughly correct or am I being unfair to them? I suppose that to most of the readers I must sound like a prematurely aged old-man – a sort of Harold Bloom or a Borges without the genius.

Anyway, Post-Structuralism, at least as it was practiced by Roland Barthes, appears to introduce the existing individual into the Structuralist equation. Barthes showed how the reader could play with a piece of literature; in *Mythologies*, his autobiography, and in *The Lover's Discourse*, he also applied structuralism and semiotics to real human situations. In this respect I think that he was like Camus or Kierkegaard because, in his works, he dramatized philosophy in the context of everyday life. Of course, his idea of the individual was very different from the so-called bourgeois individual and I suppose that he would laugh at me for speaking of him as an 'individual' at all. Nevertheless, I think that some kind of individual (maybe we could refer to it as the post-structuralist individual) is present in his work and because of this he is able, in some of his books, to bring structuralism down from an abstract and Scientific world to the everyday world – the world, as Mallarmé once said, which 'smells of cooking'. In many of his books he also wrote in an intimate, lucid and witty style that is neither scientific nor ostentatiously obscure. Maybe you will disagree with me but I really do feel that it is possible to derive some pleasure from Barthes' books. Perhaps we can say that he is a good critic because there is a strong and fascinating personality behind his writings. What do you think?

**LV.** I am fascinated by Barthes and enjoy every line he wrote.

**TW**. Ah, I have not read every line he wrote – that *Elements of Semiology* for example is unreadable to me. Also, I have not read much Post-structuralist criticism apart from Barthes and so you must excuse my ignorance. What I have read of it, however, suggests to me that, like all great writers, Barthes has suffered at the hands of people who call themselves his disciples. Lacking his wide culture, his wit and his irony, they have tended to take him too literally and, I think, also a bit too seriously. (and I should say at this point that taking things, and themselves, far to seriously is for me the cardinal sin of many academic critics – I mean, really, reading them or listening to them sometimes you would think that they were Puritan ministers.) Anyway, back to Barthes. Let us take the example of his famous essay 'The Death of the Author', which was originally published, if I remember correctly, in an avant-garde issue of a magazine entirely dedicated to Mallarmé. It was, therefore, intended for other intellectuals and poets; the idea that it would become the introduction to text books of criticism that would be used throughout American and English universities was very far from Barthes' mind. And yet this is exactly what has happened. Phrases such as 'The Death of the Author' and 'the Birth of the Reader' have become the doctrines, or the slogans, of a critical faith. I am not saying that Barthes was joking when he said these things (although he was obviously being provocative) rather that, taken out of their context, and applied by people who do not have the culture to know what an author was before he or she 'died', they are of absolutely no value whatsoever. There is also the larger issue of Barthes' heterodoxy: he was, in my opinion, a Socratic gadfly who wanted to fight everything he regarded as orthodox. The idea that his work would one day become a 'doxa' terrified him and yet this is exactly what has happened. Maybe you think I am exaggerating here but I promise you that Americans and, to a lesser extent, English academics prostrate themselves before the altars of French literary theory. I think it is part of an Anglo-Saxon inferiority complex and I hope that Romanians do not suffer from something similar. Do they?

**LV.** I am afraid they do, but a superiority complex overrules it in many critics and academics.

**TW.** I am very pleased to hear it! But, to come back to your question (which I seem to have forgotten again), I think that Scientific and objective approaches to criticism ignore the existing individual and are, for that reason, inadequate. At least that's what I think that I think. Also, I think that, in employing a language that is inaccessible to general readers, these Scientific critics fail to fulfil the function of criticism – which is to provide readers with a useful context in which to a read a book and to enrich their experience of reading. There, I am starting to sound like Moses or one of those people who go to Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park, London on Sunday afternoons to make speeches to the bewildered tourists.

Now I know that this is neither a complete nor a very satisfying answer to your question (I, for one, am not satisfied with it) and I wonder what you think about the issues that I have dealt with in my very unsubtle and insensitive way – an editor at a newspaper once asked me if I wrote my book reviews in public bars. Have you anything to add (subtract) from what I have just said?

**LV**. I fully agree, so far.

While talking about Borges, you also state that he raises 'criticism to the power of poetry.' We live in the age of hybridization, when literary genres, as Martin Amis put it, 'bleed' into one another. What is your ideal book of criticism, the book you dream to write one day?

**TW.** My ideal book of criticism, the book that already exists in the Platonic library in the sky and whose pages I glimpse only in dreams (this could be, and in fact probably is, a line in Borges), has, unfortunately, already been written by someone else. It is called *Intentions* and it was written by Oscar Wilde. I am sure that you and all the readers who have stayed with us up to this point (let me say that I admire your powers of endurance) will have read it.

*Intentions* contains *The Decay of Lying*, a Platonic dialogue in which the autonomy of art celebrated and *Pen, Pencil and Poison*, an article about a Regency critic, painter, forger and poisoner, which is at once a brilliant biographical essay and a witty parody of that genre. It also includes *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde's long Platonic dialogue, in which he adumbrates his idea of the perfect critic. For Wilde, the ideal critic is someone who uses the work they are criticizing as the starting-point for their own creation. The book ends with a disappointing essay called *The Truth of Masks* which was probably put in as 'padding'. This reminds me of something Wilde once said in a book review: 'the proof of the padding is in the reading'. (I wonder if you will be able to understand this joke, which is an inversion of an English cliché? I would explain it but then it would no longer be funny.)

It seems that Wilde later wanted to substitute for *The Truth* either his story *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* or his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. The first of these is an exciting tale of literary detection in the manner of Borges and an essay in which a brilliant theory concerning Mr W.H., the mysterious dedicatee of Shakespeare's sonnets, is put forward. Wilde suggests that Mr W.H. was Willie Hughes, a beautiful boy-actor who took the female parts in Shakespeare's plays and who became the Bard's great love and muse. As the story concerns forgery and literary crime it is both very funny and very appropriate that Wilde stole the Willie Hughes theory from an eighteenth century scholar called Thomas Thyrwhitt who was the editor and defender of Thomas Chatterton's forged 'Rowley Poems'. Chatterton can in fact be described as the presiding genius of this story: he is there somewhere, behind every line.

In *The Soul of Man*, Wilde develops the social and political dimension of his aestheticism and describes a Wildean utopia in which everyone, not just the rich, will be able to lie around in the long grass discussing Dante and the *Phaedrus*. This essay tends to shock most people as they regard Wilde simply as a kind of aristocratic dilettante or

flaneur. My ideal book of criticism would therefore be a revised edition of *Intentions* in which *The Truth* was cut and replaced by both *Mr W.H.* and *The Soul of Man*.

Why is this my favorite work of criticism? Well, in the first place it is the most characteristic and brilliant work of my favorite author. For me Oscar Wilde was a kind of dandy of the intellect, a man who played gracefully with ideas and who made a game or a toy of thought. And, of course, he is extremely funny. The dialogue form was thus perfectly suited to him. It allowed him to explore an idea from every point of view and to delicately trace its development and its movement. And it was this movement, rather than the notion of arriving at a particular conclusion, that fascinated Wilde: he regarded ideas as notes in a marvellous symphony that he was composing. By this I do not mean that Wilde was not a 'serious' thinker: his very refusal to take ideas seriously is a serious philosophical position. It is just that Wilde was never earnest or ponderous and, regrettably, it is these qualities (if they can be called qualities) that people still expect from philosophers and critics. As I said before, I find a lot of academic criticism too solemn these days – it suffers from the fact that critics take themselves far too seriously. Maybe this explains why no one else takes them seriously.

*Intentions* is animated by Wilde's remarkable personality: it is audacious, it is funny and it is irresponsible. Many people have compared Wilde's works to champagne or to music and these analogies are accurate. *Intentions* is that very rare thing: a book in which, to go back to your question, criticism really is raised to the power of poetry. As I have said, in *The Critic as Artist* Wilde described a kind of criticism that was subjective, creative and completely independent. In that dialogue, and in the other contents of my hypothetical edition of *Intentions*, Wilde is both prophet and messiah: he exemplifies and demonstrates this kind of criticism even as he describes it.

*Mr W.H.*, for example, is an extraordinary story and in *The Decay of Lying* Wilde's mastery of the dialogue form is absolute. Recently I had to write something about *The Decay* for an American encyclopaedia and in my criticism I suggested that it was the finest dialogue ever to have been written in the English language. This may seem an outlandish claim to people who think of Wilde as a lightweight author – a kind of aesthetic Groucho Marx without the moustache – but if you compare *The Decay* with one of Walter Savage Landor's 'Imaginary Conversations' or to one of Thomas Love Peacock's satires you will see what I mean. What I really wanted to say in my article was that this dialogue is one of the greatest ever written in any language: honestly, I think that it bears comparison with the work of Lucian, Erasmus or Plato. Anyway, the point, which I will come back to in my answer to your next question, is that Wilde really did succeed in writing criticism that is also art: the holy grail of twentieth century critics.

There are many other reasons why I love *Intentions*. As Terry Eagleton once said to me while we were playing cards (this is a joke, as I don't believe that he ever plays cards), in Wilde's notion of 'Language as self-referential, truth as a convenient fiction, the human subject as contradictory and 'deconstructed' and criticism as a form of 'creative' writing he looms up for us more and more as the Irish Roland Barthes' and anticipates a great deal of twentieth century

theory. Wilde criticism is, in other words, still very much part of our intellectual and historical horizon: it has a freshness and a contemporary resonance that the work of a critic such as Walter Pater lacks.

The fact that my ideal work of criticism has already been written of course presents me with a great problem. How can I write something better, how can I, in Bloom's (Harold's not Leopold's) phrase, overcome my anxiety of influence? Now I turn to you for some advice because you surely must have already written your ideal work of criticism. Have you?

**LV**. Not really. I am dreaming of my perfect work of fiction, but in criticism I could not be farther from perfection.

**TW.** I am very glad to hear that you are not quite perfect yet. That would leave no room for development.

**LV**. You say that a novel (*House of Leaves*, by Mark Z. Danielewski) is 'far more interesting to talk about than it is to actually read.' This is a Wildean way of handling puns half-innocently, half-wickedly. It also shows that you do enjoy a good pretext for criticism, even at the expense of fiction. Your creative joy is obvious. You seem to be the new critic who drags criticism into the field of imagination, and gives rigour a break. How rigorous do you think a critical text should be, and how far can it stray in the other – so much more interesting – direction?

**TW.** This boy Danielewski drove me to distraction, largely because his tedious novel is the literary equivalent of conceptual art. In other words, the ideas 'behind' it were of greater importance than its form or style and he could have saved the reader the extremely arduous task of wading through the 700 pages of his book by simply publishing a short list of the banal things he wanted to 'say'. This reminds me of something a girl once said to me at a party. She was talking about Heidegger. 'Martin', she said (I do not know what had given her the right to address Heidegger by his first name), 'was an arse-face [I should say at this point that she was from Naples and that the phrase she used was 'faccia di culo']. He started out with a perfectly clear idea of what he wanted to communicate: being-in-time, being-in-the world and all the rest of it. But when he actually came to write he used such an obscure style that it is impossible for anyone to understand what he wanted to say. Why, I want to know, didn't he just publish the plans of his books: a list of things he wished to communicate, instead of writing them out?'

I am certain that you have you read Heidegger. I have not had that particular pleasure. They tell me that even the Germans have to read it in translation. I could, however, sympathize with the girl because I once tried (and failed) to read Kant's bewildering *Critique of Pure Reason* (this title seems to me to be in some way ironic – as though the whole of that unreadable book really is a 'Critique' or satire on reason). But while I think that the girl's idea may be valid in relation to the work of certain (well, let us be frank, generally German) philosophers, I do not think it is valid

for literature or for anything that aspires to the status of art. I think it only fair to warn you that here I will start to sound a bit like Harold Bloom again, a man who is like an Old Testament prophet born out of time.

For a piece of writing to be classed as literature I think that the reader must derive some pleasure from the actual experience of reading it. The style of the writing must contribute to its overall effect: in fact it must be inseparable from its 'content'. Perhaps you can tell me whether it is the Greek or the Latin word for 'poet' that can be literally translated as 'maker' (I did not, alas, receive a Classical education as my family could not afford to give me one).

Well this reveals a simple but important truth about literature – that a writer is someone who *makes* something out of words in a more accomplished way than someone who isn't an artist. The value of their work does not necessarily derive from the abstract Platonic idea behind it but from the way in which the idea is embodied, the intention executed. All of this has, of course, been said many times, and much better, before now: Mallarmé remarked, for example, that poems were not made out of ideas but out of words.

This may seem to you a very simple and a very unnecessary thing to say but at the moment conceptual art and conceptual literature are very fashionable in England. I don't know if this is also the case in Romania but here artists and writers always think that it is necessary to have something interesting and original to 'say'. Who told these people they ought to be thinkers? Who told them that their 'ideas' matter to anyone apart from their mothers and, in some cases I hear, not even to their mothers? Ultimately the Romantics are to blame, I suppose … but why don't you tell me your thoughts about this and why don't you tell me who you think is responsible.

**LV**. It is much more fun to watch you say exactly what I dare not, not in my Romanian present context.

**TW**. Ok. But when you start to get ear-ache from hearing me go on for such a long time please tell me and I will shut up. Now, to talk about the stylistic or 'aesthetic' value of a piece of writing is very unpopular in academic circles in England. I am sure that things are different in Romania because, in my limited experience, people in continental Europe are much more aware of their culture than people in England and America. No one in Italy, for example, would question the importance of studying canonical writers such as Dante or Leopardi and no one would feel the need to justify doing so. In England and in America it is otherwise.

And this brings me around, in a very circumlocutory (this is a really Dickensian word) way, to the question of 'creative criticism' or, in Wilde's phrase, to the idea of 'The critic as artist'. Many commentators have spoken about this in the last fifty years – Barthes, Said, Bloom, Alan Bun, Frye to name a few people – but I wonder how many of them actually wrote criticism that achieved the status of art. Barthes is a great stylist and Bloom is certainly readable but neither of them have written works that display the mastery of language and form that we find in say, the writings of Wilde or Borges. (Well maybe you would disagree about Barthes, and maybe, on reflection, I do too). Now, I have

to say that my reading and my culture are not as wide as yours so you must tell me if you think I am wrong. Have I been unjust to some of our modern critics?

**LV.** You have been just to criticism as literature, and that is delightfully refreshing. I could not agree more.

**TW.** But I wonder, if I may be a bit polemical and self-contradictory for a moment, why there has been this recent interest in the idea of 'creative criticism'. Is it because critics, and in particular academic scholars, have tried to use the idea to maintain and augment their positions of power? Barthes' idea of the 'birth of the reader' seems very liberating at first, but one consequence of it has been that critics have come to be regarded, in some quarters, as equal, or even superior, to creative writers. Academic criticism has been one of the great boom industries of the latter half of the twentieth century: here and in America, for example, academic publishing is thriving. I wonder then if the idea of 'creative criticism' and the 'critic as artist' is, in the hands of academics, really as disinterested as it first appears.

Also, and again what I am saying is very polemical, I wonder whether or not the idea of creative criticism is an attempt on the part of academics to justify the very practice of literary criticism. It seems to me that, in England and America at least, literary criticism has gone, and is still going through, a kind of crisis in which questions such as 'What the hell are we doing this for?' have been asked. 'Creative criticism' is one answer to this overwhelming question. But I think it is only a valid answer if critics really do produce work of artistic worth: it is one thing to talk about it and another to actually do it.

And so if we critics are not genuine artists – if we are not, that is to say, as great as Wilde or Borges – I really think – and I suppose that you will disagree with me – that we should be a bit more humble about what it is that we are doing. And what is it that we should be doing? Well, for me, criticism is primarily a question of trying to provide readers with a context – historical, aesthetic, biographical – in which to read. We ought to be, in Pushkin's vivid phrase, the messenger who takes the letter from the writer to the reader: no more and no less – except, of course, if we really are artists. For most of us to imagine that we are actually Pushkin (or more important than Pushkin) is, I think, absurd. An English commentator once suggested the following distinction between the artist and the critic which, in most cases, seems to me to hold true. The artist, he said, has the capacity to discover America, while the critic can only hope to discover Columbus. I now expect you to enter into this debate with a whole cavalry of arguments behind you. Do you think I am talking nonsense?

**LV**. It all makes sense. I would like you to allow a better part to critics, though, in case they also want to be creative and discover something else besides Columbus. A hill? A river? Eliot was a very good advocate of this, when he talked about his favorite critical approach as *workshop criticism*.

**TW.** Yes, I think that you are right and Eliot is certainly a good example of a creative critic – a writer who used criticism to try out new ideas and who, through it, attempted to create the kind of critical atmosphere in which his own 'creative' work would be favorably judged. Although he often sounds like a preacher – as something of an outsider in England he assumed an authoritative tone in order, I think, to sound more English than the English – I like essays such as 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and the pieces on Baudelaire and Lancelot Andrewes very much. Speaking of Columbus, however, I was reminded of the words of the great American detective 'Columbo' – that there is 'just one more thing' I would like to say on the subject of creative criticism. In the interests of both you and the small group of masochistic and eccentric readers who have continued reading, I will try to be brief.

When 'Literature' became an important University subject in England (in around the 1920s and 30s) it started to exercise an influence on the creative work of the period. For instance (and as an Eliot scholar you will know much more about this than I do) Eliot's *The Waste Land* was full of allusions and obscure literary references partly because he wanted to make his work interesting to scholars who, in that period, were concerned with things like source-hunting and the relationship of individual talent to the tradition. Joyce's famous comment about *Ulysses* (viz. that it would keep the academics busy for centuries) might also be mentioned in this context. I think that Joyce was a very shrewd Irishman who knew that, if he was to convince the world of his genius, the academics had to be won over first.

In the last thirty or so years the relationship between 'creative' and academic writing has become even closer still. The very idea of 'creative criticism' that we have spoken about is evidence of this but also, if you look at some of the novels that have been written in this period, it is obvious that their authors have an academic audience in mind. Think, for example, of the novels of John Barth or David Lodge, which draw upon and dramatize certain kinds of academic criticism. These novels do not really need to be 'translated' into a critical language as they are actually written in a style that is immediately accessible to academics. It is no coincidence, of course, that some of the novels of these writers are set in English and American universities and that they are both professors of literature. I also believe that Barth and Lodge teach 'creative' writing courses: another example of the close link between academia and what used to be known as 'literature'. Nowadays, these writing courses produce many English novelists.

As usual I am probably exaggerating but I think there is a kind of Swiftian lunacy about this situation. Writers, who are themselves either academics or who have been 'taught' to write by them or for them, are currently producing works that can be easily taught and 'criticized' and which thus feed and sustain the academic industry. Gore Vidal, who has written very incisively and wittily about all of this, calls this type of literature 'school-teacher writing'. Vidal argues (and I must say that I agree with him on this, and indeed on nearly all matters) that the university has become the place in which literature is created and dissected and that the distinction between creating and dissecting has become blurred. Now these universities are entirely removed from the everyday world (where, you will ask, is this imaginary place? For the sake of my argument I need you to believe in it for a second). They are like factories located on the outskirts of a town (which is, in fact, exactly the location of many English and American Universities). The

analogy between the university and the factory is accurate except in one sense: the university makes products that are consumed only by its own factory workers. There is no market for this literature in the 'outside' world, except the part of that world which includes people who studied literature at university.

It could be argued, of course, that there is no need to worry about this situation and that great literature can be produced under these conditions. Reading contemporary fiction, however, I am not so sure. And this brings me right back to Danielewski whose book is typical of the kind of academically orientated writing I have been talking about. When I said that the novel was more interesting to talk about than it is to read I was being imprecise. I should have said that it was more interesting to teach than it is to read. Now, after this rant, I must lie down.

**LV**. In this contemporary multitude of critical approaches, and surrounded by this crazy compulsion of sticking to one and using it mathematically, you seem to be closer to commonsensical thematic criticism. You might prefer the critic to be the universal man, the Renaissance painter who saw the anatomy *in* the body, not stripped of it. Do you ever use a special critical jargon in your criticism? Do you approve of a specialized style, which requires the reader to learn it as if it were a foreign language?

**TW.** I like very much this idea of seeing anatomy *in* the body and you are quite right to say that my approach to criticism is commonsensical and thematic. I think that the reason for this is that I was born and I grew up in England, a country that is famous for its pragmatism and anti-intellectualism (as well – and you will know all about this from your recent trip to London – as its appalling weather and its awful cooking). It is no coincidence that the most important English philosophers of the last three hundred years have been associated with empiricism and utilitarianism because the English are a very practical and, so far as ideas and theories are concerned, a very philistine people. It is also because I am not an academic (I do not have a PhD. and my M.A. was purchased from Oxford University for 10 pounds – the price of two average bottles of wine).

But my approach is also due to the fact that my main critical work consists of writing book reviews for the daily newspapers in England. Now these are read by that non-academic group of people who used to be called 'general readers'. Does this group of people still exist? I think that they must do because I class myself as one of them but I suppose that we are a dying breed.

Anyway, as I see it, the purpose of a book review is to give the reader an idea of the particular qualities of a book, to place it in some kind of context, and, ultimately to tell them if it's worth spending £10 on or not. Book reviewers are not really critics and they are certainly not artists. In fact both academic critics and authors tend to dismiss them as 'hacks' (people who churn out newspaper copy for money) and amateurs. Some book reviewing is truly abysmal (particularly the variety that is autobiographical and which reads like an entry from the reviewer's diary) but, at its best, I think that it continues an ancient genre of critical writing that was practiced by authors such as Samuel

Johnson and William Hazlitt. I mean of course the 'essay' form that flourished in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Essayist-critics can be related to those men of the Renaissance who ranged over a number of intellectual disciplines. The essay is a genre that is urbane (and usually urban – we think of the essayist as scribbling away in a coffee house in Piccadilly), digressive and chatty: behind the essay there must be a recognizable voice. Essays were usually written by people with a wide culture who were recognized as sage-like figures or as arbiters of literary taste in their society. The authority of such figures derived not from the institutions they represented (in most cases they represented no one but themselves) but from the depth of their culture and the magnificence of their style. Some other examples that come to mind are Carlyle, Emerson, Virginia Woolf and, today, Peter Ackroyd or Gore Vidal.

The antithesis of such figures is of course the professional, specialized academic who, since the end of the nineteenth century has dominated literary criticism and effectively, though maybe unintentionally, killed off the essayist-sage, the 'man of letters'. In direct contrast to the essayist, the style of many academics seems to consist of unreadable jargon that is, quite frankly, not really worth the trouble of deciphering. Of course there are many exceptions to this (Terry Eagleton and Frank Kermode for example write clearly and accessibly). I realize too that economic and social conditions are such that it is now virtually impossible to be an essayist in England in the way that a writer like Ezra Pound was a century ago. I am sure that, were things not as they are, many professors would leave academia and write solely for newspapers and periodicals such as the *TLS* and the *London Review of Books*. But it is impossible to live by journalistic work nowadays (it is even harder to survive on creative or pure literary work) and most people are forced to become academics. I imagine this is also the case in Romania. But tell me honestly if you became an academic through choice or through necessity? If you could earn enough money to survive from your creative work would you continue to write academic criticism?

**LV**. I am afraid what I do is not exactly academic criticism. You are the literary secretary of Peter Ackroyd, and you have written about him. You see in his books 'games' which the readers 'must try to play as best they can.' This is my idea of a Desperado writer. At the same time, the Desperado critic is quite disappointed if the games are not there. Are you like that? Could you go back to the old Dickensian convention and be happy with what you read?

**TW.** You mention the fact that I am Peter Ackroyd's literary secretary – that is, his researcher and general assistant. Let me say at once that I am incredibly fortunate to have this job as it is this that has given me the money and the spare time that I need to write for myself. Since my family has no money without this job I would have had to study for a PhD six years ago or, like many of my university friends, I would have been forced to take up a useful profession such as accountancy or soliciting. I am, therefore, conscious of the fact that my attitude to criticism and, in particular, my

hostility towards academia is made possible by my privileged social and economic position. This is entirely due to the fact that I work for Peter Ackroyd.

The playfulness that I discern in Peter Ackroyd's work and which you refer to as being characteristic of the 'Desperado' writer is, as you say, very common nowadays. I also agree that, after reading authors such as Umberto Eco or Leonardo Sciascia (an amazing writer I have only just discovered), it is very hard to go back to novelists such as Dickens. The main difference between Dickens and say Eco, is I suppose, that Dickens does not allow the reader to take an active part in his stories (in academic jargon they are 'readerly' or 'closed' works). He is not interested in creating a space between the reader and the book, a space in which the reader has the freedom to think and to play. Rather like the film director Steven Spielberg, he demands passivity from readers and our relationship with his books tends to be emotional (through empathy and identification with the characters) rather than intellectual.

I am sure that you would agree with me however, when I say that the kind of playfulness we are talking about can also be found in the work of novelists of the past. Cervantes, Sterne, and Carroll are only the most obvious examples. But is the playfulness that you are concerned with something altogether different from the playfulness of these writers? Would it, for example, be impossible to define Sterne as a 'Desperado' author?

**LV**. No. On the other hand, some bitter authors I have interviewed told me the very same thing as a reproach, an attempt to snub, show me I was on the wrong track. The difference from what went before is in quantity, in recurrence. It is a common feature now, while it was just isolated *avant la lettre* before.

**TW**. Yes. I see what you mean. Italo Calvino, in fact, makes this point in an essay he wrote about Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*. He says that Diderot's self-reflexive style was a challenge to the conventional literature and the philosophy of his period but that nowadays this style is common. And of course, no one exemplified the truth of this better than Calvino himself. But, as to going back to writers such as Dickens, I must confess to secretly enjoying his works. I feel quite guilty about this for exactly the reasons that I have mentioned – that is, that there is very little intellectual engagement when you read him. I could be disingenuous and say that I admire Dickens as a stylist or that I approach him in the ironic spirit that informs Oscar Wilde's famous comment 'One would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.' The fact is though that I find Dickens very funny and, although the sentimentality and the moralizing can get a bit annoying, his gifts as a comic writer, as a painter of London street scenes and as a caricaturist make him eminently readable. On my mother's bookshelves there is a complete edition of Dickens' works and I know that, when I am old and in my anecdotage (in, that is, a couple of years), I will slowly read my way through them all. Maybe if I have children or grandchildren I will make them read Dickens to me. This would be a dreadful thing to do and it reminds me of that terrifying story by Evelyn Waugh in which a prisoner is forced to read Dickens to his captor for a period of several years. But, tell me, do you enjoy reading Dickens?

**LV.** Yes. But I enjoy more tearing him down from his pedestal for the sake of argument, in order to show my students (I teach $20^{th}$ century British literature) how we differ, what it means to step into a new millennium with new tricks (I hope you won't mind this word which makes most academic-poets in your country rave).

**TW**. No. I love the word 'trick' and I think it perfect in this context. It reminds me of the artfulness and mischievousness of Shakespearean Fools or of the great Till Eulenspeigel or of Loci, the Scandinavian God. It captures the craftiness and the wit and also the nihilism of much modern writing. According to my dictionary, it comes from the old French word for treachery.

Now, perhaps you will disagree with me here, but I think that certain kinds of 'Desperado' writing (if I have understood this term correctly) can become a bit dull or, more accurately, a bit sterile after a while precisely because, sometimes, they deny the reader the possibility of emotional engagement. I could mention something like Italo Calvino's boring *If on a winter's night a traveller* in this context. Now this book is too relentlessly intellectual and 'arch' or 'ironic' for my humble taste. I prefer works that combine the virtues of traditional writing – strong narratives, exciting situations, sharply defined characters, emotional appeal – with the kind of playfulness that we are talking about. Great modern historical novelists, such as Suskind, Sciascia, Fowles, Eco or Peter Ackroyd seem to me, for instance, to satisfy the emotional as well as the intellectual needs of readers. I suppose this is why I am drawn to the historical novel – it is a potent mixture of traditional and modern writing.

**LV**. In my opinion, Desperadoes do resort to emotional involvement (see Ishiguro) but hide it under mock-heroic irony.

You write about *Chatterton*: 'if you pricked the characters they would bleed quotations.' This is just one example of the vividness of your style. You enjoy writing, and your text, though highly analytical and very much to the point, could not be farther from dry research. Do you also write fiction, or poetry? Is criticism your only way into creation?

**TW.** I think that it is absolutely necessary for critics to enjoy their work, not only because joy is infectious but also because criticism is not, as I have said, a Science but rather a matter of preferences, passions and opinions. Without these things it is impossible, in my opinion, to write criticism or anything else. 'A thinker without passion', wrote Kierkegaard, 'is like a lover without love – a paltry, mediocre thing'.

I could also mention Oscar Wilde here (I apologize by the way for always bringing him into the conversation but the fact is that I literally think sometimes in quotations from his work – this very sentence in fact is a half-quotation from him) who said that an unbiased critical opinion was meaningless: it is, of course, also an impossibility. Because of this, the criticism that is valuable and the criticism that tends to survive (maybe these are not always the same things), is

coloured by the prejudices and the character of the person who has written it. Think, for example, of the criticism of Johnson, Pound or Hazlitt. But I do not want to bore you by repeating things that I have already said and that other people have said before me.

Up to the present I have mainly written criticism. But (and this probably contradicts everything I have previously said *against* creative criticism) I have always believed (and hoped) that the transition from criticism to creative work would be a smooth one. This certainly proved to be the case with a story that I wrote about Oscar Wilde recently which was composed concurrently with a scholarly article on the same subject. To my relief I found that the two kinds of writing animated each other and, to some extent, overlapped. In fact, when I think about it, it was somehow easier for me to introduce and to explore critical ideas indirectly in the story than it was to do so directly in my article.

This may demonstrate, in a very small and insignificant way, the general possibility of creative criticism. However, it may also have something specifically to do with Oscar Wilde. Wilde, as you know, was a great stylist and also a very pithy writer (think of his prose poems or his epigrams). Because of this, it is very difficult to translate his writing into a form that does not destroy its essential quality (which resides in its style). Wilde's writing resists summary or dilution: it can only be repeated or, in some way, reperformed. This is why, when not quoting Wilde, many of his critics (i.e. me) end up trying to write like him. Authors such as Peter Ackroyd, Terry Eagleton or C. Robert Holloway, take this a stage further by writing criticism that takes the form of plays and novels in which they parody Wilde's style. And this is what I also tried to do in my short story. Perhaps what I have just said about the difficulty of translating literature into the terms of content analysis is true with regard to any great writer.

Anyway, my story has encouraged me to try to write other fictional works and, at the moment, I have a novel in mind that may well turn out to be a creative-critical book. I am encouraged in this endeavour by my favorite authors, all of whom have been great critics and also great creative writers. The relationship between criticism and creative writing in the work of Borges is obviously a symbiotic one, for example, and I hope that this will also be true in my case. I think, however, that you should be the one to speak on this subject as you have written about 100 times more than I have. Do you distinguish, I wonder, between your critical and creative work?

**LV.** I do, and it does not make the former any more appealing. You are almost happy when you conclude an essay on Ackroyd by saying, 'Ackroyd's oeuvre cannot be closed: we cannot attribute to it an ultimate meaning.' It is my theory that this is the major feature of a Desperado writer, and that no Desperado reader could do without it, because the reader has changed so much that old fashioned clarity and stability would bore him. I wonder if you would accept being called a Desperado critic, one that cannot enjoy a piece of literature unless there is a part in it for him, too, namely that of proclaiming the beauty of uncertainty, of ingenuity, of inconclusiveness?

**TW.** I am very happy to accept this title because I like your idea of the 'Desperado critic' and also because I have been called many far worse things in my time. In your book, or rather your 'reading diary', *British Desperadoes at the turn of the millennium* you say that 'Desperado literature' has created 'Desperado Readers' and 'Critics'. I think that this is quite true in my case – in fact sometimes I feel as though I am Borges' creation and that I am living out, with unnecessary footnotes and interpolations, something that he has written. I also like the fact that, instead of enumerating the attributes of a 'Desperado Critic' and discussing the subject on an abstract level, you dramatize and exemplify the role of the 'Desperado Critic' in your own criticism, which I find delightfully rambling and very readable. I hope that the same could be said of this interview.

And now, I really must stop talking – I have, alas, neither the energy nor the linguistic resourcefulness of a character in Joyce or Woolf. Before I go, I want to thank you very much for our conversation and to tell you what a pleasure it has been to chat with you. I think that one of the best things in the world is to sit down and talk about literature even if we have to use the internet to do so. I have always believed (maybe mistakenly) that the café culture of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Paris – the culture of poetry readings, alcohol, talk, alcohol, artistic movements, and alcohol – created the atmosphere in which great works of art could be conceived and born. Maybe with the internet it will be possible to create one enormous European café in which people can chat and exchange ideas as we have done today. I hope so.

October 2001

**POETS' NEW YORK**

**INTERVIEWS WITH RUTH FAINLIGHT, LEAH FRITZ, EVA SALZMAN AND ANDREI CODRESCU**

## RUTH FAINLIGHT

**LIDIA VIANU:** Were you born in New York? When? What was it like when you were a child?

**RUTH FAINLIGHT:** I was born in New York – more precisely, in a nursing home on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, in May 1931. At that time, so I have been told, it was a pleasant neighborhood of wide streets and newly built apartment buildings for aspiring young lower-middle class families, many of whom were Jewish. But my family moved to England when I was five years old, so my memories are few. I clearly remember being taken to see my mother in the same nursing home, when my brother was born more than three and a half years later, and vivid images like snapshots of playing in the park, boating on the lake with my father, watching the sun come through the window blind in my bedroom while I had my afternoon nap, and sitting on the floor of my aunt's porch (my mother's only sister, Ann, who lived nearby, and with whom I spent much time, especially after my brother's birth), drawing or playing with small sample books of cloth, choosing which colours and textures I liked best to dress my dolls.

**LV**. Is childhood in New York any different from childhood in a smaller town or in the country?

**RF.** In England, we lived in London, in a middle-class suburb in the northern part of the city, a few streets away from my father's sister and her family. I imagine my childhood was much the same there as it would have been in New York City.

**LV**. Could you feel as a child that New York was a multicultural city? Did you fit in easily or did you feel an outsider?

**RF.** I was very aware as a child in America that I lived in a multi-cultural city.

My mother had arrived in the city with her family when she was about six years old, among the tens of thousands of immigrants who went to the USA in the first years of the 20th century. The town where she was born was then in the Austro-Hungarian empire, then became Romanian, Polish, and is now in the Ukraine. Sometimes the people who visited my family then, in the 1930s, were refugees from Germany or Austria. My aunt's neighbor and best friend was an Italian woman, and I was often in her kitchen while they talked and laughed together. So I was used to being with people from many different backgrounds. New York has always been a city of immigrants.

**LV**. As a teenager in New York, what was your cultural life? TV? Theatres? Movies?
As a student and later, what magazines did you like to read? When did you become interested in New York's literary life and what places did you go to, what New York reviews did you read?

**RF.** My mother, brother and myself returned to New York in June 1941 as 'British refugees', while our father remained in England. At first we lived in a small apartment in Manhattan. My brother and I attended summer classes at the local school, and she worked as a secretary. But it was too difficult for her to work and look after us, and we were sent to a boarding school on Long Island. While we were there, she was injured in a road accident. Our aunt Ann, who was now living outside Washington DC where her husband worked, came to collect my mother from the convalescent home, and the two of us from the school, to live with her in Arlington, Virginia. My cultural life then consisted of attending art classes for schoolchildren every Saturday morning at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, after which I would go home and listen to the opera matinee broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York with my aunt, who was a great lover of opera. She was a cultivated woman, and had many books on her shelves which I am sure had a strong influence on me. But I had always read a lot, and can still remember writing poems when I was ten and eleven years old – in fact, while we were still in New York, I read some of them on a children's radio program, and had a few published in some sort of magazine (but their titles, and what the magazine was called, etc., is all lost in the mists of time). By the age of twelve I was already quite sure that I was an 'artist' – but whether that would manifest in painting or in writing was still uncertain!

**LV**. Why did you leave New York? Was it an easy decision? If you were to decide to come and live in London again, would you still do it?

**RF.** I left America because my parents decided it. My father had been in the war and after he was demobilised in England, he decided to stay there. (He was English; but had gone to America as a young man, met my mother, married, etc. etc.)

**LV**. What was the impact of London on you? How old were you when you came to London?

**RF.** Coming to England at the age of 15 was an enormous shock – I was a real American teenager, used to an entirely different style of life: accommodation, school, food, etc. etc. It was not long after the end of the war, and a much poorer and harder life than I had come from.

**LV**. Who were your literary friends in New York and who are now your literary friends in London?

**RF.** Although I have not lived in America since then – apart from two semesters as poet-in-residence at Vanderbilt University, in 1985 & 1990 – I continue to think of myself as more American than English, and have kept my American passport. Many of my literary friends are Americans who either live in England or often visit the country. And in fact most of my friends, literary or otherwise, are not English, but 'foreigners' living in London – with whom I seem to feel more at ease than with 'real' English people.

**LV.** Where do you feel more at home, London or New York?

**RF.** Because my circle is made up of others like myself – English people who grew up in other countries, people who came to England as refugees or for personal reasons such as marriage, and of course, those Americans who adore England! – I feel very much at home in London. But in New York I feel entirely at home, like a fish in water. It is my place, finally. (Although I doubt if I shall live there again.)

**LV**. Does your poetry have traces of New York imagery? What is the emblematic feature of New York in your soul?

**RF.** I believe there are many traces of New York, or American, imagery in my poetry. When I first met Adrienne Rich in the early 1970s, I was intrigued, and gratified (because it seemed to confirm such an important aspect of my identity), when she told me how surprised she had been to see me referred to as an English poet, because to her ear, my poems sounded so American.

June 2005

## LEAH FRITZ

**LIDIA VIANU**: Were you born in New York? When? What was it like when you were a child?

**LEAH FRITZ**: Yes, I was born in New York. We moved to Brooklyn from Manhattan when I was small, and lived there until I was about five years old. I went to kindergarten there, and have many memories of it. One is that we lived near a synagogue, and since I was small and cute, my friends used to send me down into it when there was a wedding, because they would always give me cake to take to my friends. My sister was five years older, and I think I hung around with her and her friends a lot, although there was a little boy I played with across the street. Where we lived then was really quite suburban, but soon we moved back to Manhattan, which was 'the city.'

**LV**. Is childhood in New York any different from childhood in a smaller town or in the country?

**LF**. Yes, I think it is somewhat different. In Manhattan, we were exposed to art at an early age. By 11, one of my 'hang-outs' was the Museum of Modern Art, and I also went to the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Natural History – all not far away. My own children were brought up in these places, too. I think New York is a brilliant place to bring up kids. It's only when you get older, that you may want to leave.

**LV**. What did your house look like?

**LF**. I lived in several houses. The first I remember was the top floor apartment in a three-story red brick house in Brooklyn that my father built. He was an architect, and during the depression we were pretty broke, so he built a house for a cousin who was less broke, and we got the top floor apartment. That was very nice. My uncle George lived with us, and we had a young woman who lived there, too, and did the cleaning and took care of me. She was a Polish American from a mining town in Pennsylvania. I loved her a lot. She left when I was four years old to 'better' herself: she became a waitress. My mother kept up with her, and later Anna married and did very well. We had a large terrace at the back of our apartment there, which made it very pleasant. Eventually, my parents bought a house on the West Side of Manhattan. My father had an office there, and we used the ground floor and the first floor for our home. We had a back garden, so we lived differently from most people in Manhattan who usually live in apartments. We rented out the rest (it was five stories altogether) as small apartments, at low rentals – but they paid our mortgage.

**LV**. Was it typical of New York architecture? What is, in your opinion, typical of New York architecture? Do New Yorkers love their housing comfort?

**LF**. The house we lived in on the West Side of Manhattan was limestone and Victorian. My father altered it to suit us. It was typical of *that* kind of architecture. Manhattan is, as everyone knows, basically a bunch of canyons between skyscrapers, but there are many limestone and brownstone houses five stories high that still exist in between. Yes, of course, New Yorkers like comfort! Who doesn't?

**LV**. Could you feel as a child that New York was a multicultural city? Did you fit in easily or did you feel an outsider?

**LF**. I didn't think about multiculturalism as a child. White and black people lived in different parts of the city then, and in my neighborhood – both in Brooklyn and later in Manhattan – most people were Jewish, although there were many who were not. There were many refugees from the holocaust in Manhattan when I was growing up. Although in general I 'fit in' with the other children, I felt in some ways an outsider because of personality differences. For one thing, I was considered something of an 'intellectual,' which was frowned on by some children. I was sociable, on the one hand, but did have my head in the clouds often. To a great extent I lived in my own world. I must say, though, that I was never a true introvert, nor was I, generally speaking, an unhappy child. Every summer I went to camp in the countryside, and there I did often feel unhappy because I was poor at sports.

**LV**. As a teenager in New York, what was your cultural life? TV? Theatres? Movies?

**LF**. Not TV. That came later. I did go to the theatre, but more often to the movies, which were much less expensive. I would say the museums and libraries were very important. At the Museum of Modern Art I saw foreign movies and old silent films which made a great impression.

**LV**. As a student and later, what magazines did you like to read?

**LF**. The New Yorker was my favorite.

**LV**. When did you become interested in New York's literary life and what places did you go to, what New York reviews did you read?

**LF**. In my late teens I became involved with artists and writers socially. I worked at the Museum of Modern Art for a while. I spent a lot of time in Greenwich Village, had artist boyfriends... I wrote poetry from the time I was eight and always thought I'd be a writer. I read the reviews in The New Yorker, the New York Times, The Village Voice (which I later wrote for, along with other publications, but I rarely did reviews).

**LV**. Was it uncomfortable at all to live in a place which was a melting pot of all nationalities? Did you ever feel uncomfortably different from anyone?

**LF**. No, except in ways described above.

**LV**. Could you describe the social classes in New York? Have they changed since your were a child? Which do you belong to?

**LF**. I find it difficult to answer this question. I guess I was 'middle class.' But I was never conscious of class then. Not even when I was grown up and worked in Harlem, where class differences should have been obvious. I was aware of poor and not poor and rich – but never in an ideological sense. The racial and sexual differentials seemed more urgent. In New York, poverty was more evident among African Americans and Hispanic Americans than among 'whites,' and seemed more a consequence of race/ethnicity than of class, so I was working to help correct that imbalance, and also the aggression against and misunderstanding of women.

**LV**. Why did you leave New York?

**LF**. For many complex reasons.

**LV**. Was it an easy decision?

**LF**. Surprisingly, yes.

**LV**. If you were to decide to come and live in London again, would you still do it?

**LF**. You bet I would!

**LV**. What was the impact of London on you? How old were you when you came to London?

**LF**. I was 54. It made me happy. I've made a whole life here. It's probably the best place in the world to live. I'm very lucky.

**LV**. Who were your literary friends in New York and who are now your literary friends in London?

**LF**. My friends in New York were the important feminist writers. We've just lost one of them, Andrea Dworkin. There is Susan Brownmiller, Grace Paley, Robin Morgan, Shere Hite – many others. Sometimes I see them when I go there or they come here. My literary friends in London are a legion! A hundred poets, perhaps. The ones I am closest to are not at all well-known – neither am I! – but they do very fine work.

**LV**. Where do you feel more at home, London or New York?

**LF**. In London.

**LV**. Does your poetry have traces of New York imagery? What is the emblematic feature of New York in your soul?

**LF**. Of course, my New York background is evident in my work. I am a quintessential New Yorker – and proud of it. My accent is undeniable. The 'emblematic feature' is my sense that I can do or be anything I want to; in a word, freedom. And, I suppose, optimism. And, I suppose, street-smarts. That's a certain caution in the streets, knowing how to relate to really bizarre situations and surviving them. But I say this with my fingers crossed and knocking on wood.

June 12, 2005

## EVA SALZMAN

**LIDIA VIANU:** Were you born in New York? When? What was it like when you were a child?

**EVA SALZMAN:** I was born in an uptown Manhattan hospital on the East River, but grew up in Brooklyn Heights. My composer father, then writing for the Times, devised a birth announcement styled as a mock-up news feature reviewing our twin musical debuts (I'm the elder by eight minutes). We were 'sopranos of considerable proportions…(who) presented mainly atonal music with little subtlety but plenty of vigour.' So, no change there.

To survive each day in this exhausting, competitive city felt like a major achievement. Out-of-towners, immediately recognizable to seasoned New Yorkers, are advised to avoid muggings by trying to look like they belong, like they own the place. NYC often strikes me as oddly Third-World. You fly into the shoddy JFK, our international airport, and get sucked into a disorganized, pell-mell city, which is also a place of immense wealth and power. My childhood memories include driving over pot-holed highways, forever being repaired. Finally, the penny dropped; the repairs were never meant to be completed. This way the jobs kept going. Maybe it's to do with the mob. I don't know. New Yorkers are arrogant, but also brimming with life, energy… and opinions. We award ourselves top marks in the Street-Cred department. People describe Americans as lacking the Irony gene, but New Yorkers are famed for their sarcastic, sharp wit. One visit home, I was struck by the sight of a pot-bellied guy swaggering, Adonis-like, along Brighton Beach. This guy was going to inhabit his space, no matter what. I miss that un-English unashamed physicality, the Mediterranean gesticulating. I walk faster than anyone I know, even if I'm going nowhere.

The subway system is hot as Hades, the trains at that time not air-conditioned and deafeningly loud. Standing on a platform as a train rumbled in, you could yell at the top of your lungs into your companion's ear and s/he wouldn't hear you. Giuliani, our first Republican mayor in ages, cleaned everything up. Don't know what he did with the homeless, maybe dumped them in New Jersey. Now I'm nostalgic about a dirty, dangerous NYC, although I never actually thought of it as dangerous really. When Giuliani tried to clean up our artwork too, objecting to an exhibition featuring the artist Chris Offili, who uses elephant dung in his paintings, New Yorkers put their collective foot down. NYC dropped right down on the Murder Capital chart. Apparently, most murders happen between about 2 and 5 AM, when good citizens are in their beds (though not this good citizen teenager, it has to be said!) and are either drug-related, or Domestics gone wrong. Why throw a frying-pan when you can shoot a gun?

During the 2004 Republican Convention, we were overrun by stars-and-stripes, ten-gallon hat Texans and polyester-suited mid-westerners, taking buses to go just a few blocks. Why don't they take the subway like us, I asked a

cop. He said the Delegates' folks were calling the police from all over the country, nervous about their relatives' safety in our liberal hands. We were affronted to be hosting this convention at all.

**LV**. Is childhood in New York any different from childhood in a smaller town or in the country?

**ES.** I had an unusual degree of freedom, thanks to hippie-ish parents but NYC kids are mostly precocious as hell. My country yokel friends were barred from visiting us city slickers in Sodom, as their parents thought of the place I lived. Nowadays, the Sodom idea doesn't seem far-fetched, though NYC is nothing like Bush's America. People forget: it's a *big* country! Nationalism is abhorrent to me, but I do feel 'patriotic' about NYC, identifying with the place profoundly. In my heart of hearts, it feels like the centre of the world.

**LV**. What did your house look like?

**ES.** 29 Middagh Street, still my parents' house, is a four-story clapboard house, with marble fireplaces and wide floorboards. Although my parents are naturalists – my father is an expert on Long Island birds – we're no good with gardens. Ours, called the 'yard', is overrun with weeds. One summer, I made the effort with my first husband; a photo commemorates another summer when we sublet to talented gardeners. Old homes need constant repairs; we've always rented out the upstairs duplex, needing the cash. My grandparents' house, now sold, was also an early Federal building just around the corner on Cranberry Street, where, Walt Whitman's poem 'Leaves of Grass' was first published.

7 Middagh Street's various tenants included W.H. Auden, Carson McCullers, Benjamin Brittain, Salvatore Dali and the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee. In my as-yet unwritten screenplay, she rehearses her new striptease acts for a slightly bored, though perceptive and analytical Auden. (Actually, the Irish poet Paul Muldoon sort of got there first, with his poem '7 Middagh Street'.) The neighborhood has many literary associations; Norman Mailer's house overlooks the Promenade, from where the Manhattan skyline's more famous views are taken, including the one of burning Twin Towers. That was like seeing my past crumbling before my eyes. We didn't know anyone, but everyone knew someone who knew someone. My husband's artwork was in one tower, a smaller loss than the collection of Rodin, this loss itself dwarfed by the enormous loss of life.

**LV**. Was it typical of New York architecture? What is, in your opinion, typical of New York architecture? Do New Yorkers love their housing comfort?

**ES.** The Promenade was our consolation prize for the building of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, an example of the famous Robert Moses's zeal for civic development as exemplified by road building, which in this case cut through the

Heights ruthlessly, knocking down the historic 7 Middagh Street, among other things. An underground slave ‘railway’ is meant to run under the Heights, with hiding places and escape routes. Or maybe I’ve made that up, or someone else made it up. It happens to places already packed with history. After years of local petitioning, something with which my parents were involved, the Heights was designated an historic neighborhood, to protect what was left, including the area’s later turn-of-the-century brownstones, for which NYC is famous and which are more typical of the kinds of homes all over the city. Originally built as a suburb for wealthy shipping magnates, wishing to overlook their docks, the Brooklyn Heights fell on hard times after World War II. People couldn’t afford the heat or servants needed for large houses, many of which were divided into apartments, or boarding houses, like Number 7. This is why my grandparents, lucky to be working throughout the Depression, could afford to buy in a neighborhood, now expensive and desirable again. Even here, few buildings date back to 1829, the year our house was built. Many New Yorkers live in co-ops, with more affordable housing found mainly outside of Manhattan, in the further reaches of the boroughs: Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, Staten Island, or over the Hudson river in New Jersey.

**LV**. Could you feel as a child that New York was a multicultural city? Did you fit in easily or did you feel an outsider?

**ES.** Having attended multicultural public (free) schools for many years, I had friends from many backgrounds, classes and ethnic groups: black (African origin, as opposed to the Caribbean slant in the UK), Chinese, Egyptian, Puerto Rican and American Indian. What is a New Yorker but someone from somewhere else? Still, feeling the ‘outsider’ is the writer’s habitual condition! I hung out with neighborhood kids on the stoop, which is the Dutch word for the steps out front. (Middagh, also a Dutch word, means ‘midday’.)

**LV**. As a teenager in New York, what was your cultural life? TV? Theatres? Movies?

**ES.** Unlike the clichéd American family, we had no dishwasher, no TV, but this movie fanatic got her paws on the latter, when I was old enough to get away with it. I’d stay up watching the Late Show, Late, Late Show and, finally, the Late Late Late Show, which educated me in (mainly Hollywood) cinema history. Well, that’s my excuse.

Because I trained in dance and choreography for many years, my fairy grandmother – the one with the talent for buying houses – bought me tickets to see the great ballet companies. There I was, this lone teenager, sitting right up front, practically getting sprayed by Mikhail Baryshnikov’s sweat. (Once, during his big entrance in ‘Giselle’, he tripped on this sword!) I saw them all: the New York City and Joffrey Ballet companies, American Ballet Theatre and the Dance Theatre of Harlem, which was ground-breaking in its training and presenting of black dancers in historically white ballet classics. Alvin Ailey Company, a favorite, was known for its multicultural make-up: mainly black, but also

Puerto Rican, Oriental and the odd white. I cherish the memory of Natalaya Makorova's perfect 32 fouettes in 'Swan Lake', and Rudolf Nureyev partnering Margo Fonteyn, to name a few Greats I was privileged to see in their prime.

Contemporary dance was really more my thing: the Martha Graham, Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham troupes. Because my father wrote music-theatre, I was exposed to work on the cutting edge: the avant-garde, the experimental. My father's multi-media piece, 'The Nude Paper Sermon', featured a text by the poet John Ashbery and the actor Stacy Keach, who later went to Hollywood (and to jail, but that's another story…). This piece's finale afforded me my first if fleeting glimpse, of the naked male form. Like I said, we're precocious. My father knew and worked with well-known composers, musicians and conductors including Pierre Boulez, William Bolcolm, Joshua Rifkin and Charles Rosen. His mother (same grandmother!) also wrote music-theatre, and was a child vaudeville actress, touring with her parents, who earned their living in this business.

**LV**. As a student and later, what magazines did you like to read?

**ES.** We had various political, current affairs and environmental journals around the house. My mother, an environmentalist, was a campaigner against the dangers of nuclear power before this became a fashionable cause. We also subscribed to satirical publications such as Mad Magazine and National Lampoon, and got the New York Times daily, this being the only broadsheet paper widely available, aside from the Washington Post, which you'd have to go a little further to find. (Most US media is narrow, superficial, biased, utter garbage.) I'd steal my grandparents' New Yorker magazine, which I loved, at first mainly for its famous cartoons and covers. Alongside the English and American 19th century novels I devoured, I read Cosmopolitan, movie magazines, comic books and *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, being indiscriminate and haphazard in my reading. Still am.

**LV**. When did you become interested in New York's literary life and what places did you go to, what New York reviews did you read?

**ES.** I never got especially 'interested' in literary life, just as I never thought to 'become' a writer; I just wrote and loved books. I had the immense good fortune to have access to my grandmother's astounding library of 20,000-ish books, crammed on shelves or piled up in towering, toppling piles, on the third floor of before-mentioned Cranberry Street house. It was like having a private library at one's disposal, except she'd *give* me the books. What treasures! Literature was my escape, my passion. The Irish writer Frank McCourt was my teacher at Manhattan's Stuyvesant High School. His idea of teaching English was to tell us stories about the Irish, so I thought English was nothing but stories. And so it is. As it turned out, he was rehearsing on us his bestseller *Angela's Ashes*. Every Friday the class was asked to present their teenage angst-ridden literary scribblings, and I always strained at the leash to bore everybody with mine. Most of

the other students, brilliant in the math and science – the school's specialty – took McCourt's class because it was an easy ride. He gave everyone 96%, and there were no tests.

**LV**. Was it uncomfortable at all to live in a place which was a melting pot of all nationalities? Did you ever feel uncomfortably different from anyone?

**ES.** Back to the writer's 'pathology'! Aren't writers all uncomfortable in some way? NYC had nothing to do with it. I like 'difference', in fact am often drawn to black sheep. When I lived in Paris at the age of four, the kids threw rocks at me in the school-yard. The south of England, was homogenous in such an alien way to me. One day, driving into Tunbridge Wells, I nearly crashed the car, after spotting a perfectly ordinary man crossing the road. It took me a moment to understand why I'd done this double-take: I hadn't seen a black man in three months, and hadn't even realized it until that moment.

**LV**. Could you describe the social classes in New York? Have they changed since your were a child? Which do you belong to?

**ES.** Class in the US doesn't exist in the same way as it does in the UK, despite what people say. Money is certainly more connected to notions of class. Although there's a certain 'Brahmin' caste of old US families, the classes aren't so rigidly defined. I guess I'm educated middle-class, privileged in am artsy bohemian way. My grandparents were poor immigrants, the first generation to achieve financial security but only after years of working hard, scrimping and saving. The houses they managed to buy went up in value later. My grandfather had seven brothers and sisters; all of their earnings went into a common pot, to pay for the youngest brother's education; later, he worked his own way through university. He modernized his house himself, putting in the plumbing, electricity and a kitchen, doing all the repairs at our house too. When he died, everything fell apart.

**LV.** Why did you leave New York?

**ES.** The old story. A man. An Englishman. First, he came to the US, while I finished my BA degree, and then got my MFA at Columbia University, after which we moved to the UK… and got divorced. Since then I've tried a Scotsman and an Irishman, but am now married to an American from Long Island, not far from NYC! Life is strange.

**LV**. Was it an easy decision?

**ES.** One of the hardest I've ever made. I'd never have left New York City otherwise, not in a million years. I think I left precisely because I knew this, and wanted to experience another place and people. Many things about America disturbed me but I really truly didn't think I'd stay in the UK so long. Even now, I'm in denial that I live in England.

**LV**. If you were to decide to come and live in London again, would you still do it?

**ES.** Knowing what I now know? No point in going down that road. How do I know if I'd have done the things I've done, if things had been different. It's impossible to undo one thing without undoing the rest. Writing is often about trying out the lives one didn't lead.

**LV**. What was the impact of London on you? How old were you when you came to London?

**ES.** I was 18 when I first visited London, but didn't move to England until I was 24, living first in Kent, then Brighton before moving to London. My intellect is urban, but my spirit floats around in the country somewhere.

**LV**. Who were your literary friends in New York and who are now your literary friends in London?

**ES.** The poetry world is tiny, everyone knowing everyone. My friends include writers of all kinds, but I'd be bored having only literary friends. There are many false friends in the literary world, despite our supposedly lofty pursuits. I've never been clever – or devious – enough to pretend I like people, just because they might help my 'career'. Despite my inborn cynicism, I'm continually amazed by people's duplicity and shallowness.

**LV**. Where do you feel more at home, London or New York?

**ES.** After many years, I'd still say NYC. When I go home, it's like I've been holding my breath all this time. Suddenly I can heave a sigh of relief and be a loud-mouthed extrovert – just like everyone else.

**LV**. Does your poetry have traces of New York imagery? What is the emblematic feature of New York in your soul?

**ES.** The traffic hum of the Brooklyn Bridge was the background score of my childhood, and a I wrote a sonnet about it, in order to re-possess what I felt to be mine. For a while anyway. Rather than give a nod to Crane's famous poem on the subject (Walt Whitman too wrote about it) I decided to brazenly rip off his lines, comparing the suspension cables

to a harp. The completion of the bridge was overseen by Emily Roebling, from the top floor of her and her invalid husband's house, in Brooklyn Heights.

June 2005

## ANDREI CODRESCU

**LIDIA VIANU:** When did you first see New York?

**ANDREI CODRESCU:** From the chartered airplane taking fresh immigrants to America in 1966; the plane was full of Yugoslavs who started singing 'America the beautiful!' when they saw the Statue of Liberty.

**LV**. Was it as a fresh emigrant or later?

**AC.** We changed planes in New York then and went on to Detroit, my first American home.

**LV**. What struck you first?

**AC.** The verticality: it was like Europe with an erection.

**LV**. Are New Yorkers different from other people? Are they more or less than human? Or brighter?

**AC.** They are different because they are of so many backgrounds and ethnicities; figuring out how to get along sometimes took generations, but eventually there emerged a quick, witty, generous but not stupid breed of citizen called a New Yorker.

**LV**. Why must everyone love the Big Apple?

**AC.** A lot of people hate it because it's too fast. I used to love it because sorry, destitute humanity rubbed shoulders with billionaires (at least in theory), like in Walt Whitman's poems, but now it's clean and safe like Minneapolis. I think they even put mayonnaise on the sidewalk in case you drop your Wonder Bread. Manhattan, at least, is for the rich now. The artists and the poor can still live in Brooklyn and Queens.

**LV**. Have you ever lived in New York for a longer period of time?

**AC.** Yes, two years, 1968-1970, and every year for at least a month.

**LV**. Why are New York houses the envy of the planet when I have seen tiny apartments and cupboard kitchens there with my own eyes? Is New York a myth?

**AC.** New York has energy and spunk. Your apartment is your refuge: you conduct the rest of your life in the agora, or working, with the people. If you invite someone to your apartment it's a great sign of friendship; the rest of your meetings are conducted in restaurants, bars, luncheonettes, etc.

**LV**. Does New York have a cultural life for real? There are so many museums and theatres and reviews, but do they actually use all those things? Or is it for the use of foreigners passing by?

**AC.** Those things are very real and they constitute the social fabric of the city through their wealthy patrons. New Yorkers use their culture, but like all things, it comes and goes in cycles. In the 60s New York was where painting and poetry were, in the 70s the art and music scene, in the 80s institutional revamping and architecture, in the 90s the exodus of the poor from Manhattan, in the beginning of the 21st century, human intimacy and care born of the terror attacks on 9/11.

**LV**. If you could choose to live in your dream town anywhere on this planet, would it be New York?

**AC.** Yes, with a summer place in the country.

**LV**. Is New York a melting pot? Have you ever felt an alien there because you were not born in the States? Once, in 1991, when I was a Fulbright professor in New York State and my ten-year-old daughter went to school for a year there, a boy her age showed her the globe and said: 'Where is your Romania? Why don't you just go back there?' And the next day she asked him: 'Were you born in the States?' 'Yes,' he said. 'Were your parents born there?' 'Yes.' ' And your grandparents?' 'Yes.' 'And your great-grandparents?' 'Yes.' 'Everyone in your family ever?' 'Yes.' 'Then you are a red Indian'. And he did not like that. Have you ever had to fight for your status like that?

**AC.** Yes, but, like your kid, I put them quickly in their place. That's normal in a place of immigrants: the Dutch of 1700 thought all immigrants were trash, the Irish fought the Italians, the Jews fought them all, the Hispanics had to claw their way up after that. 'The Gangs of New York' had it operatically right. The town toughens you up, it doesn't mollycoddle.

**LV**. What does it feel like to be published and sold in all big bookstores in New York (and not only)?

**AC.** Great. I used to steal my own books because I couldn’t afford them, but now I buy them to give to people I meet.

**LV**. Does the radio represent your personality? Americans, lots of them, know you that way. I was told so by a professor of French at NY State University. He listened to your broadcasts with delight and said he had never heard anyone talk so well and wittily and with such a great sense of humour.

**AC.** My best work is in my books, but most people listen to the radio. I have no idea what ‘representing my personality’ means. I intend no such thing. I just want to amuse, shock, and horrify people and make a living at it.

**LV**. Was exile a liberation, a trauma, an outlet? Is America your house in your dreams? Do you ever dream of Romania these days?

**AC.** For me at age 19, fresh from the quiet hells of Ceausescu, it was certainly a liberation. I loved my generation in America, which had the same feeling about whatever hells they’d escaped from. (Even if it was just a nice, clean suburb of Chicago). I had nostalgia for Sibiu, my hometown, but since 1989, when I covered the so-called ‘revolution’, I have returned many times and I feel quite at home in Romania now. It’s a recondite pleasure to feel at home in two worlds.

June 2005

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**JULIA COPUS (16 July 1969)**

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**PETER DALE (1938)**

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**<u>IAN DUHIG (9 February 1954)</u>**

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**JOHN FOWLES (31 March 1926 – 2005)**

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**DAVID HARSENT (1942)**

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**SELIMA HILL (13 October 1945)**

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**MIMI KHALVATI (28 April 1944)**

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**<u>WAYNE LANTER (1937)</u>**

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**<u>DAVID LODGE (28 January 1935)</u>**

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**MARY MICHAELS (17 August 1946)**

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**<u>TIMOTHY MO (1950)</u>**

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**<u>JOHN MOLE (12 October 1941)</u>**

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**CAROL RUMENS (10 December 1944)**

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**EVA SALZMAN (20 April 1960)**

*The English Earthquake*, Bloodaxe, 1992
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**FIONA SAMPSON (1963)**

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**JO SHAPCOTT (24 March 1953)**

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**EUGEN SIMION (25 May 1933)**

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**ANNE STEVENSON (3 January 1933)**

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## LIVIU IOAN STOICIU (19 February 1950)

Poetry
*The Train Flag*, 1980
*Heart of Rays*, 1982
*When Memory Comes Back*, 1985
*A Parallel World*, 1989
*Aristocartic Poems*, 1991
*Collective Solitude*, 1996
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## MATTHEW SWEENEY (1952)

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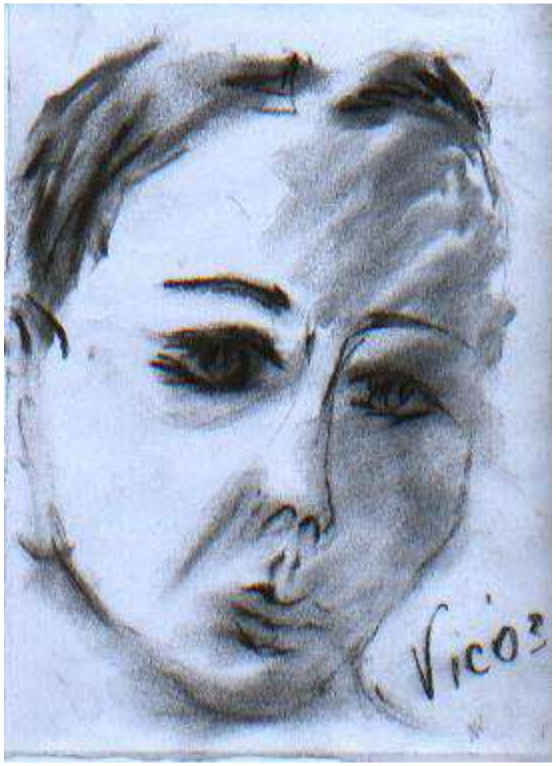
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